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**The Happy Couple: American Marriages in  
Hollywood Films  
1934-1948**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film**

**Department of Film and Television Studies**

**University of Warwick**

**April 2012**

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## Acknowledgements

I must begin by acknowledging a great debt to my supervisor, Ed Gallafent. His sensitivity and generosity informed every stage of my research process, and when my spirits have been low, his good humour has revived me. I have benefited from his wide knowledge of film and literature, and shared in his fondness for Hollywood's memorable supporting actors. He has set me an example of rigorous and responsible scholarship, which I hope is reflected in this work.

In one way or another, every member of staff in the Department of Film and Television Studies has contributed to my development. I wish to single out Victor Perkins, whose module on Renoir and Ophuls was a revelatory moment in my education. Teaching with Alastair Phillips and Charlotte Brunsdon gave me confidence and clarity. Charlotte's advice and interest has encouraged me at crucial points in my academic career, and it was an accidental meeting with her at Birmingham Moor Street that prompted me to begin the doctoral process. I owe her my thanks for that, and for many other kindnesses. Jon Burrows has helped me many times and Catherine Constable has expressed enthusiasm for the films of Myrna Loy and recommended crime novels.

Tracey McVey, Anne Birchall and Heather Hares enrich the department with their warmth and have assisted me in countless ways. Similarly, Richard Perkins, my subject librarian, has patiently tracked down Tom Conway films and compensated for my IT inadequacies.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who have funded my doctoral study and who provided a travel grant for me to promote my research in Detroit. This trip was also part-funded by the University of Warwick Humanities Research Centre. The Department of Film and Television Studies' conference



allowance permitted me to attend *Stanley Cavell and Literary Criticism* (Edinburgh, 2008) and to speak at conferences at the University of Winchester (2009) and Northumbria University (2011). I wish to register my thanks here to the librarians at the University of Kent, the BFI National Library and the Margaret Herrick Library, whose efficiency has been invaluable.

The last two acknowledgements are the most important. My parents Gregory and Gillian, my brother Dominic and my grandparents Peter and Jean have supported me in every possible way. It was with them that I first saw many of the films discussed in this thesis. They, more than anyone, have fostered my love of film.

Róisín Muldoon's love, intelligence and wit have inspired me to complete this thesis. She has contributed far more than she can know, and her insights into the films discussed herein have enriched my understanding of them. Like Nora Charles, she doesn't scold, she doesn't nag and she looks far too pretty in the mornings.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Róisín and to my family.

## Abstract

This thesis examines Hollywood narratives of married life produced between 1934 and 1948. Using Stanley Cavell's seminal *Pursuits of Happiness* as a point of departure, I compare the depiction of benign domesticity across four chapters. Combining textual analysis, genre criticism and studio archival research, I re-evaluate Cavell's notion of 'films in conversation', and suggest that narratives of marriage call for an approach that considers intertextuality, audience address and the interaction of star personae.

My first two chapters focus on MGM's six Thin Man films, discussing an ongoing series' portrayal of a continuous marriage. In my analysis of *The Thin Man*, *After the Thin Man* and *Another Thin Man*, I argue that the mystery plots of these films inform and inflect the depiction of marriage in private and public space. In contrast to previous studies that view *Shadow of the Thin Man*, *The Thin Man Goes Home* and *Song of the Thin Man* as signaling the onset of domesticity and the format's decline, I view these films as proposing alternative ways of attending to the problem of the male child.

The third chapter compares *Penny Serenade* and *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*, films in which the happiness of a family is made contingent upon the construction of a home. In this chapter, I suggest that building a home for one's daughters permits the films' mise-en-scene to be invested with possibility of renewal. My fourth chapter discusses three films in which a partner returns to marriage after a period of absence – *My Favourite Wife*, *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Tomorrow is Forever*. With particular attention to the role of 'the other woman', I note ways in which these narratives propose the future of their couples.

## Introduction

This thesis examines Hollywood narratives of married life produced between 1934 and 1948. I have chosen to distinguish between (a) films that depend upon a shared understanding that there is such a thing as marriage (which could be typically thought of as the ceremony itself) and (b) those that depict it as a process, or a form of experience. The first category might be conceptualised as films about marriage that do not depict its actuality. *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940, MGM) is an exemplary case, a film that precisely charts the social and sexual preoccupations of couples on the verge of marriage, and that concludes with a ceremony in which the future (the lives of the couples after the ceremony) is ambiguous. I will not be writing about films that fall into this first category, as a concession to my word limit, but also as an assertion that narratives of marriage – films in the second category, that depict the *experience* of married life and of parenthood – demand a different terminology than that applied to romantic comedy as a genre.

To illustrate these differences, we need only look at the famously ambiguous final moments of *The Palm Beach Story* (Preston Sturges, 1942, Paramount). As two nervous couples stand at the altar, a title assures us, ‘And they all lived happily ever after’, before adding, ‘Or did they?’ The moment neatly undermines the convention of marriage as an ending in Hollywood narrative, repositioning it instead as an ongoing uncertainty. In a typical *volte-face*, Sturges implies that we cannot know how things will end for these couples, since their married lives will be a continuing negotiation and renegotiation of roles.

This is not quite cynicism, more like emotional realism - an acknowledgement that fictional lives can be thought to continue when the lights go up in the cinema and

that conjugality might just as easily be the beginning of a story as its conclusion. The question mark is suggestive, leading us to speculate whether the complexities of domestic life can really be contained within the Production Code Administration (PCA) guideline that the ‘sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld’.<sup>1</sup> Despite (or perhaps, because of) the heightened enforcement of the Code post-1934, Hollywood films frequently denigrate, ridicule or devalue marriage. One thinks of W. C. Fields in *The Bank Dick* (Edward F. Cline, 1940, Universal) muttering about his oppression at one end of the spectrum, and at the other, the endless possibilities afforded Hollywood screenwriters by narratives of infidelity.

This thesis does not discuss burlesques of marriage, or those painful stories of its dissolution. Rather, my corpus has been selected from the body of films that depict marriage as (relatively) happy and continuous. This is a study that privileges close textual analysis, and does not claim to explain any overall historical/cultural movement in American society, even though individual films and cycles suggest movements within themselves. With one exception, I have chosen not to write about films that are regarded as classics. In examining ‘smaller’ films, I hope to get closer to the texture of Hollywood’s common attitudes to married couples in harmony, and to highlight the achievements of these oft-neglected films.

The range of expression available to this narrow field can be illustrated with reference to two moments, both bits of business around the romantic deployment of flowers. In *The Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934, MGM), a husband sits down at a nightclub table with his wife, intent on making her laugh. He pokes his nose on the spray that decorates the table, and orders a waiter to remove them. Compare this to the wife in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946, Samuel Goldwyn

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<sup>1</sup> Doherty, Thomas, *Pre-code Hollywood: sex, immorality and insurrection in American cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 362.

Company), preparing a breakfast tray for her husband, recently returned from active service. She hesitates over adding a decorative flower, plumping for it, then turning in the doorway and removing it. In both cases, the symbol of romance is repudiated, but for quite different reasons.

In *The Thin Man*, the husband dismisses the flowers through his confidence that he has his wife's full attention. The pleasure of their provocative interplay is enriching in a way that conventionalised displays of affection are not. What distinguishes this couple is their distance from the clichés of heterosexual courtship. In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, however, the wife's tentativeness reveals quite the opposite: an anxiety over disconnection through prolonged absence. In both cases, there is an embarrassment over the earnestness and obviousness of a flower. This is not to say that romance is dead, just that in these marriages, it manifests itself in richer and subtler ways.

Of course, tonally these moments are worlds apart, coming from films with very different projects. While *The Thin Man* seeks to charm us with the wit and mutuality of its central pair, *The Best Years of Our Lives* takes on the pressing social problem of the post-war integration of returning veterans. One of the aims of this thesis is to chart a shift in the representation of marriage, what we might call the gap between these two films. At the same time, we must not let these differences blind us to points of connection. It is significant that in both examples the wife is played by Myrna Loy, an actress frequently described as 'the perfect wife'. My fondness for Loy, and my desire to analyse the detail of her performances, has to some extent structured the selection of my corpus. While I have attempted to be mindful of the social and historical context of my chosen films, I have also wanted to respect the

development of star personae. It has seemed crucial, in discussing films about couples with shared pasts, that I attend to the pasts of their performers.

I have termed my subject ‘American marriage’, since it seems to me (following Stanley Cavell) that questions of democracy and self-determination are integral to these representations. It will be evident throughout this study how influential Cavell has been to my reading of these films. There is an important distinction to be noted, however – while Cavell restricts his attention to ‘comedies of remarriage’, I have chosen to look at marriages that do not conform to this category. While they frequently contain tensions inherent to the comedy of remarriage, these elements are suppressed in favour of the validation of the ongoing couple. In my discussion of *My Favourite Wife* (Garson Kanin, 1940, RKO) and *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* (H. C. Potter, 1948, RKO), I test these films as remarriage comedies and find them wanting. Nevertheless, while these marriages do not observe the Cavellian dictum that only second marriages are true marriages, I have invariably found his meditation on small moments illuminating. While my chosen films are not all serious, I have taken them seriously. They deserve nothing less.

One of my preoccupations has been with Hollywood’s depiction of happiness. Paradoxically, audiences may feel more comfortable watching warring couples than contented ones. In relation to Nick and Nora Charles, the central couple in *The Thin Man*, Kathrina Glitre notes the difficulty of spinning plots out of happy love, writing,

[...] this is not because happy love cannot exist, but because it cannot be narrativised. Narratives need conflict and change. Consequently, Nick and Nora’s relationship exists in juxtaposition with a conventional murder mystery plot; their happy moments do not advance the story, but function as a form of spectacle, arresting – even supplanting – the causal chain of events.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood romantic comedy: States of the union 1934-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 83-84.

Because of the complexities of this relationship between character, performance and narrative, there is a tendency in literature on the subject to characterise marriage as torpid, with a film's achievement being gauged by its resistance to the (allegedly) inherently conservative state of marriage, and the narratives it generates. I have countered this assumption in the following discussion, taking my cue from Glitre in attempting to pin down the nature of that 'juxtaposition'.

Following this introduction, I have included a literature review that sets out the books and essays that have shaped my thoughts on the representation of marriage. I have grouped them in the following sequence: (1) studies of genre and narrative forms, (2) theories of performance, and (3) analyses of 'screen couple' films. As might be expected, there is considerable crossover between categories, with some work (that of Stanely Cavell or Kathrina Glitre, for example) seeming to fit all three. In some cases, these are texts that do not feature explicitly in the subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, all have influenced me significantly, regardless of whether they have provoked dissent or agreement.

I began this study with a desire to write a sustained examination of MGM's six Thin Man films, a series that is rarely discussed in terms of coherence. Where previous commentators have seen the sequels as representative of a growing conservatism in Hollywood's portrayal of marriage, I have chosen to address the internal logic of these films as a continuous series, following one married couple between the years of 1934 and 1947. Equally, while the series has consistently been viewed in terms of its decline, I have argued that each additional entry proposes variant strategies with which to address the narrative problem of marriage.

My first two chapters focus on this series of six films, splitting them into two groups of three. In my discussion of *The Thin Man*, I resolve the seeming disparity

between married romance and the investigation of crime, arguing that movement between contrasting social worlds structures the film's themes and concerns. One of the ways that narratives of happy marriage advance a plot is through engagement with genre, and I contend that the oft-derided mystery elements in *The Thin Man* are crucial to our reading of the couple's 'happy moments'. In *After the Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1936, MGM), the challenge of instituting a series (an ongoing record of a marriage's progress) is viewed in relation to the repetition and inversion of its predecessor's jokes, character types and situations – in effect, the creation of a series's conventions. *Another Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1939, MGM) is located as a crisis point in the series, a film that acknowledges the difficulty of repetition and the narrative problems that ensue from introducing Nick Jr. and making its irresponsible protagonists into parents.

In contrast to previous studies that view *Shadow of the Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1941, MGM), *The Thin Man Goes Home* (Richard Thorpe, 1945, MGM) and *Song of the Thin Man* (Edward Buzzell, 1947, MGM) as signalling the onset of domesticity and the format's decline, I see these films as proposing alternative ways of attending to the problem of Nick Jr. My second chapter, then, focuses upon the figure of the male child, his absence and presence, and the pressure he brings to bear on the Nick-Nora relationship. While this is usually conceptualised as a greater polarity between domesticity and mystery, I suggest that while Nick and Nora continue to investigate crime, Nick Jr.'s exclusion from the narrative problematises the space of the home. *Shadow of the Thin Man* associates Nick Jr. with imagery that restricts his irrepressible father, and I use the film to think about how patriarchal education is configured. In doing so, I refer to a parallel MGM series, the Johnny Weissmuller-Maureen O'Sullivan Tarzan films. While *The Thin Man Goes Home*



does not feature Nick Jr., I argue that it continues the series's interest in patriarchy by making Nick and Nora children, and introducing us to Nick's parents. Making the Charles family home a stable space of domesticity, the film draws on the stereotypes of the small town, reconsidering its central couple in relation to notions of the frontier and the American heartland. As a result of the transformed milieu, I view the film as the most successful attempt to reconcile patriarchy with the pleasures of the central marriage. In contrast, *Song of the Thin Man* is discussed as at once a regression and a paean to that which has been irretrievably lost, the glamour and freedom of 1930s comedy. In this film, Nick and Nora are depicted as somewhat lost in an urban world that they no longer truly occupy. The problems ensuing from an articulate Nick Jr. are irreconcilable with the demands of the ongoing series, resulting in incoherence.

My third chapter continues the interest in parenthood by looking at marriages with daughters. In both *Penny Serenade* (George Stevens, 1941, Columbia) and *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*, the happiness of a family is made contingent upon the construction of a home. In the former, a flashback structure permits a meditation on the process of narrativising marriage, articulating its own construction. While the marriage in this film is presented as unsatisfactory in many ways, it merits inclusion for the ways it proposes possibilities of redemption through its mise-en-scene. I argue that responsibility and the nurture of a daughter (an adopted child who is little more than a function of the plot) are configured around the presentation of domestic space, and that this space is mutable, changing with the moods of the film. Building upon this interest in space, my discussion of *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* looks at the way images of home affect family harmony. Contrasting indoor and outdoor spaces, the film dramatises the fantasy of the American frontier compromised by commodity culture. While personal development is equated with the

transformation of environment, the film devalues nostalgia, making its future of contentment in the country a curiously fantastic advertising image.

My final chapter focuses upon the relationship between past and future. Drawing upon Tennyson's poem 'Enoch Arden', I examine the trope of partners returning to a marriage after a period of absence. In these films, learning how to be a parent again is crucial, although it is not always the returning partner who must undergo instruction. I begin by considering a film I take to be unsuccessful: *My Favourite Wife*. In this movie, a dismissal of the act of conversation leads to an oddly unmotivated plot, one that depends on our understanding of what 'Cary Grant and Irene Dunne' have meant to each other in previous films. In looking at the role of 'the other woman', I suggest that the film fails to account for the value of its central marriage, and so undermines our interest in that marriage's future. In depending so heavily upon allusion - specifically to *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937, Columbia) - the married couple of *My Favourite Wife* learn nothing in the film. They exist in stasis, shedding no light upon their future, revealing little about their past.

My analysis of *The Best Years of Our Lives* characterises it as a consideration of the post-war couple, where the success of heterosexual romance is taken to stand for the success of a society. In presenting three men of differing class, and detailing their interaction with wives, sweethearts and families, the film plays upon the anxiety of a fragmented, dysfunctional future. I take issue with Robert Warshaw and James Agee's criticisms of the film, arguing that the contradictions and problems facing these characters are not avoided, even if they are elided. As in my discussion on *My Favourite Wife*, I take a marginal figure, the unsuitable wife, to represent the generosity of the film's values.

My final case study, *Tomorrow is Forever* (Irving Pichel, 1946, International Pictures), is unlike the other films in the chapter in that the reunion of the family is made impossible and undesirable. Operating with a kind of dream logic, the film has a husband presumed dead return to his home town as another person. Unrecognised by his wife (who has remarried), the husband works to dispel her trauma and begin her life anew. In doing so, he destroys the memory of their original marriage, ensuring that his wife can take on 'tomorrow' with a new family, freed from her past. In some ways, the film is the most extreme instance of a thread that runs through my corpus, the idea that marriage and family are social constructions, and that they may be reconstituted or dissolved as such.

Within my designated timeframe, I have chosen not to organise films chronologically, except in the case of the Thin Man films, where an attention to the sequence of the series seemed important. Rather, I have grouped my chapters along the themes of genre, sons, daughters and returning spouses, with an overarching interest in the spaces in which these themes play out. These are concerns that are not limited to the period of the 1930s and 1940s, and I could have extended my discussion profitably into later decades. Again, the demands of a word count have prevented me from doing so, and I hope that what my discussion has lost in comprehensiveness, it has made up for in precision and insight. Also, I had originally intended that all of my films should be taken from the span demarcated by the Thin Man series, 1934-1947. However, the importance of *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* (1948) to any discussion of domesticity and family caused me to relax my rule. My defence of this decision is simple: in focusing on the way a family's future is visualised, the film allows us to reflect upon the conventions and tropes of Hollywood's past. Similarly, the central couple of Myrna Loy and Cary Grant, in the most mature forms of their

comic personae, reflect the changes that this period wrought upon the representation of marriage.

## Review of the literature

### Cavell's couples

In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Stanley Cavell brings philosophy and literary criticism to the discussion of romantic couples in Hollywood comedy. Providing readings of seven films which he terms 'comedies of remarriage', Cavell claims them to be inheritors of 'the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy, especially as that work has been studied by, first among others, Northrop Frye'.<sup>3</sup> In his introduction, he categorises the films as 'investigations of...ideas of conversation, and investigations of what it is to have an interest in your own experience'.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of, and commitment to, light and humorous films as works capable of serious thought has been a basic tenet of my own work. By understanding how (and why) the couples in these films speak to each other, we better understand how these films speak to us.

Of the seven films that Cavell considers, *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940, MGM), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940, Columbia), *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949, MGM) and *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937, Columbia) feature married, or previously married, characters; Cavell's other three texts, however, do not. His inclusion of *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941, Paramount), *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934, Columbia) and *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938, RKO) reveals his broader definition of marriage as a spiritual rather than a legal bond.

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<sup>3</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

For Cavell, then, marriage is a natural state rather than one authorised by society. He writes,

a central claim of mine about the genre is that it shifts emphasis away from the normal question of comedy, whether a young pair will get married, onto the question whether the pair will get and stay divorced, thus prompting philosophical discussions of the nature of marriage'.<sup>5</sup>

In the three films that do not feature already married characters, Cavell identifies parallel situations – the fantasy of marriage in *The Lady Eve*, the charade of marriage in *It Happened One Night*, and the creation of a shared childhood in *Bringing Up Baby*. This can be problematic, since this blanket use of the term 'marriage' for forms of heterosexual romance excludes the possibility of viewing these relationships from other perspectives. While I take Cavell's point that marriage is a matter to be determined by the individuals involved, my own thesis places marriage within the wider context of family and society.

In these films, Cavell observes a process of education, and re-education, between partners as to what their contract entails. Verbal communication leads to mutual understanding and gratification, and Cavell takes John Milton's statement that "meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and noblest aim of marriage" as a founding premise.<sup>6</sup> Laying out the process of remarriage, Cavell writes,

The conversation of what I call the genre of remarriage is, judging from the films which I take to define it, of a sort that leads to acknowledgement; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

Cavell's readings chart a couple's journey to self-knowledge, their 'learning to speak the same language'.<sup>8</sup>

Cavell places the films in historical context, suggesting that 'this phase of the history of cinema is bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of women', noting that the actresses in these films were of the generation that followed the first wave of feminism.<sup>9</sup> This 'new woman' must acknowledge her sexual desire, a process that involves listening to the lectures of the man, even when those lectures are pompous and self-important.<sup>10</sup> The lack of mother characters for these women (mothers who would articulate first wave feminism) leads Cavell to conclude that 'the absence of the mother continues the idea that the creation of the woman is the business of men; even, paradoxically, when the creation is that of the so-called new woman, the woman of equality'.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, this passage has brought Cavell a great deal of criticism, which I discuss at greater length below in my assessment of Kathrina Glitre. Female autonomy is a running theme in my thesis, featuring in my characterisation of the heroines of the Thin Man series and *Penny Serenade*, while the education of the male (a narrative to which Cavell pays scant attention) is the subject of my second (and tangentially, my third) chapter.

Cavell emphasises the space that these couples create for one another, transforming their surroundings so that they can be playful together 'within the gravity of adulthood',<sup>12</sup> learning the lesson that 'what they do together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together'.<sup>13</sup> For Cavell, this realisation is only possible away from the restrictions of society, in what he terms

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

(borrowing from Northrop Frye's mythos of Spring) 'the green world'.<sup>14</sup> This spatial metaphor, in which seclusion destroys the misunderstandings and preconceptions of the first marriage and creates a stronger, more compassionate relationship, is crucial to Cavell's thesis. This renewal inherent to remarriage is integral to happiness and moral health. Searching for a 'moral of the genre of remarriage', he writes, 'even good first marriages have to be shed; in happy circumstances they are able to shed themselves, in their own favour'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, Cavell is indebted to Frye's observation that 'the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another'.<sup>16</sup> This new society is generally signalled by a festive occasion at the narrative's conclusion, with weddings being 'the most common'.<sup>17</sup> Frye notes the ways in which these endings imply concordance without specificity:

The society emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents [...] a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society. Its ideals are seldom defined or formulated: definition and formulation belong to the humors, who want predictable activity. We are simply given to understand that the newly-married couple will live happily ever after, or that at any rate they will get along in a relatively unhumorous and clear-sighted manner. That is one reason why the character of the successful hero is so often left undeveloped: his real life begins at the end of the play, and we have to believe him to be potentially a more interesting character than he appears to be.<sup>18</sup>

Frye notes a tension in these conclusions, that while 'something gets born at the end of comedy', it is frequently 'a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past before the main action of the play begins'.<sup>19</sup> With regard to narratives of marriage, this raises some pressing questions. For the comedy of remarriage, these

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<sup>14</sup> Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism: four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 182-184.

<sup>15</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-171.



are not so problematic – the story ends with a new marriage, a festivity truer than the first. However, in the films I discuss in this thesis, remarriage is not at issue. In these cases, another form of celebration is demanded, be that the capture of a murderer, the building of a house, or the construction of a family. We might also question to what extent society is transformed (cutting to the heart of the perceived conservatism of marriage narratives), and what we can derive from the repeated situation of married couples observing and commenting upon that society. This explicit commentary, and the implication that it will be ongoing, recalls Preston Sturges, and the question mark that underlies every ‘happily ever after’.<sup>20</sup>

### **Challenging Cavell: David R. Shumway**

Shumway disputes Cavell’s claim that remarriage movies instruct the audience about marriage itself. Rather, Shumway argues ‘that they do just the opposite: they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal – but not the end – of romance.’<sup>21</sup> By questioning the validity of the remarriage cycle, Shumway positions these films as screwball romances that obscure the fates of their protagonists. In this formulation, marriage is the ‘death of romance’,<sup>22</sup> a narrative strategy that closes down desire by reasserting patriarchy:

We accept the happy ending in part because of the romance that has been constructed as erotic tension seeking to be relieved in orgasm. In this sense, the ending functions as a consummation of our desire as well.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> While I have referred to Cavell’s later engagement with Hollywood cinema in *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) and *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), their relevance to my thesis has been slight, and it did not seem appropriate to include them in this literature review.

<sup>21</sup> Shumway, David R., ‘Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage’, *Cinema Journal*, 30:4 (Summer 1991), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Given the epistemological weight that Shumway places on these endings, it is problematic that he does not address their openness. He opines that ‘in this illusory eternity [...] marriage is rendered mystical, in spite of whichever of its realities the film has indulged earlier’.<sup>24</sup> However, the films in question do not obscure what has come before, or leave us without any clue as to what lies ahead for the couple. Indeed, as Cavell’s discussion of the ending of *Bringing Up Baby* makes clear,<sup>25</sup> the couples in question must continue to negotiate their marriage in perpetuity. It is precisely the absence of orgasmic release (I am thinking especially of the teasing final scenes of *The Awful Truth*) that weakens Shumway’s claims.

Shumway’s discussion of *Adam’s Rib* is revealing. He observes that it ‘alters some of the conventions of the screwball comedy to produce an examination of conflict in a marriage that seems ideal’ but ultimately reneges on this since it ‘nonetheless affirms marriage’.<sup>26</sup> His anti-bourgeois bias extends to the conventions of classical Hollywood; thus, *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Susan Seidelman, 1985, Orion) is constructed as a positive and empowered response to these conventions through its explicit and self-conscious challenge to what has come before. In this view, classical Hollywood marriage is mystified by romance because ‘ideological structures always tend to affirm the status quo’.<sup>27</sup>

In a later work, Shumway reasserts his fundamental disagreement with *Pursuits of Happiness*, but admits that ‘there are few books on film (or anything else) to which I have found myself profitably returning so often’.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Shumway’s conception of screwball marriage rejects Cavellian mutuality, viewing the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>26</sup> Shumway, David R., ‘Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage’, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>28</sup> Shumway, David R., *Modern Love, Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. x.

films as ‘comedies of conquest’ in which ‘spunky, strong women are attractive but [...] their submission is required for the romance to be consummated, for marriage to take place’.<sup>29</sup> My objection to this reading lies not just in my quite different sense of the agency and intelligence of these women, but also in my hesitation over what we might term an over-determination of endings. When Shumway writes ‘[o]ne reason that screwball comedies almost always involve the rich is that their world is a metaphor for the reward that romance promises of love’,<sup>30</sup> he misses the extent to which those rewards are problematised and sometimes devalued. The films I discuss in this thesis are not fantasies created to alleviate anxiety over ‘social fragmentation’<sup>31</sup> – they are narratives that address the problems and pleasures of society directly.

### **The problem of happiness**

One of the challenges in writing about benign marriage is the potentially problematic absence of drama. The concern is evident in Dashiell Hammett’s morose complaint to Lillian Hellman when working on the treatment of *Another Thin Man* that he had created an ‘insufferably smug pair of characters’ who only permitted a story of ‘how Nick loved Nora and Nora loved Nick and everything was just one great big laugh in the midst of other people’s trials and tribulations’.<sup>32</sup>

In *Ordinary Pleasures*, Kay Young draws upon examples from classical literature, film and television to argue that sustained conversation between lovers, their ability to ‘understand each other’,<sup>33</sup> provides a drama of the everyday in her chosen texts. Like Cavell, Young is interested in moments that reveal ‘the pleasure of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>30</sup> Shumway, David R., ‘Screwball Comedies: Constructing Romance, Mystifying Marriage’, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Shumway, David R., *Modern Love, Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Dashiell Hammett to Lillian Hellman, 26 December 1937. Layman, Richard and Rivett, Julie M. (eds.), *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> Young, Kay, *Ordinary Pleasures: couples, conversation, comedy* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), p. 3.

a performed union’<sup>34</sup> and which she likens to the performance of a comedy team, ‘where the story told – the joke – requires both partners to construct it, where the ability of one to create depends on the creativity of the other’.<sup>35</sup> In this, Young’s thesis is similar to mine, using the construction of the couple to shed light upon the workings of the narrative as a whole.

However, we part company in Young’s focus on language. While my attention to moments of film attends to details of mise-en-scene and performance, Young writes,

My emphasis for discussion in both cases – written narrative and performed narrative – is on the words spoken, though I gesture toward describing the presence of the visual and aural cues that envelop the words on film. However, because my written text cannot reproduce those sights and sounds, my focus remains fixed on what my words can reproduce and analyze – the actual words themselves of the partners’ exchanges.<sup>36</sup>

This methodological decision is understandable, if anathema to my training as a film scholar. In this thesis, I have attempted to use description as a critical tool, one which transcribes physical space and movement, and in doing so explains the ways that disparate pro-filmic elements work together to create meaning and effect (see my account of Andrew Klevan below). Indeed, my discussion of marriage is predicated upon the performance qualities of the actors described. Young’s admission acknowledges the impossibility of capturing the visual in words – but it is the *attempt*, the act of translation, which, for me, distinguishes responsible film writing.

Young’s interest in dialogue between couples leads her to construct them as ‘moments of conversational intimacy [that] enable their stories to be “on holiday” from the driving/linear work of plot in the sustained, relational plane of the talk that is

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

“just talk””.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, Young circumvents the assumption that ‘Happiness presents itself perhaps even more than intimacy as an impossible site of narrative’.<sup>38</sup> Young’s discussion of how moments of happiness contribute to a plot is especially interesting in that she focuses on a couple that take up half of my corpus: Nick and Nora Charles of the *Thin Man* films. In my first two chapters, I argue that the couple’s comic exchange is integral to our reading of the progression of the mystery plots they inhabit.

Young writes:

That narratives need not perpetuate their stories only in the linear drive from problem to solution reveals itself in the comic outburst by partners which “stops” the show, or in the subversions/variations tried by partners to upset the expected comic rhythm of stasis, crisis, stasis. Comic play by lovers – the movement from feedline to punchline, song lyric to dance step, wisecrack to pratfall, gesture to joke – makes moments of “ordinary” happiness.<sup>39</sup>

Illustrating this point with the example of Astaire and Rogers moving from narrative into dance sequence, Young echoes Arlene Croce’s musing that plotlessness might produce an ‘ideal Astaire-Rogers musical’.<sup>40</sup> The thought is reminiscent too of Kathrina Glitre’s suggestion that we read the ‘happy moments of Nick and Nora’ as spectacle, arresting the narrative.<sup>41</sup> In the following chapters, I will advance my own theories on how shared moments between married couples inform a larger diegesis. Here I merely note the interest of both Young and Glitre in the subject: a fundamental critical question arising from the study of representations of happy marriage.

Young conceptualises the couple’s connection with larger (diegetic and narrative) worlds as taking ‘the relatively small space in which a narrative displays a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Croce, Arlene, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972), p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: states of the union 1934-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 84.

speech act (the conversation of lovers) and then how it makes the larger space of a whole mode of narrative (New or romantic comedy)’.<sup>42</sup> She emphasises the act of performance between couples, in which meaning is created by ‘linguistic and nonlinguistic elements of their shared speech’.<sup>43</sup> In this way, married conversation creates ‘a context for shared speech, time, and ways of knowing each other – a way of being in the world together’.<sup>44</sup> This type of conversation does not advance the plot, but anchors it; a level of discourse that ‘embeds itself inside the narrative world as part of what composes its *texture*’.<sup>45</sup>

While Young’s thesis laudably draws attention to the small moments between couples, her discussion of Hammett’s novel *The Thin Man* and its film adaptation is problematic in the way that it opposes ‘the drama of the plot’<sup>46</sup> and ‘a static “us,” which comments upon the case and its players and itself’.<sup>47</sup> In this reading, ‘the development of the plot [does not] proceed from a development in their relationship’, and the crime element of the narrative is reduced to the subject of Nick and Nora’s ‘idiomatic dailiness’.<sup>48</sup> In my first two chapters, I will suggest an alternative reading that synthesises plot and character through a mapping of social space. As I have noted above, Young is drawn to moments that allude to this connection; however, by avoiding mise-en-scene and performance in favour of language it is impossible for her to reconcile them.

By relating male/female comedy to traditions of high (New comedy)<sup>49</sup> and low (vaudeville)<sup>50</sup> culture, Young illustrates the range of expression open to

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<sup>42</sup> Young, Kay, *Ordinary Pleasures*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

conversational moments between couples. Observing that '[i]nteraction is what is fundamental about comedy – the external display of responsiveness',<sup>51</sup> Young goes on to note the voyeuristic aspects of scenes of shared intimacy:

What the audience becomes privy to, therefore, is a kind of illicit knowledge. The thrill of that experience heightens the effects of the comedy by necessitating a negotiation as to how to make the position of voyeur tolerable.<sup>52</sup>

I address these questions of spectatorship in my *Thin Man* chapters and later in my section on *The Best Years of Our Lives* in chapter 4. In both instances, the warmth conveyed reflects the 'thrill' that Young identifies. However, I contend that the effect of these sequences are very different, and that this must be attributed to the varying sensibilities of the film-makers, the performance qualities of the actors and their relationship to technical aspects like camera placement and editing.

*Ordinary Pleasures* is a key text in the literature of happy marriage, and I have been influenced by its insights on married conversation as a reflection of a larger social world. However, my conclusions differ from Young's as a result of our methodological divergence. Like Young, I see the couples in my corpus as representing 'a central, if unstated, tension between charting a path toward knowing oneself as a member of a community and achieving individuation through separation'.<sup>53</sup> However, while Young conceives this tension as demanding that 'these couples separate themselves from the others of their worlds by virtue of their gifts for what they can do together, and out of a desire to be alone together',<sup>54</sup> I argue that couples are defined not just by their mutual interaction, but by their interaction with the larger social world, and by how that world views them. My particular attention to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

the visual composition of couples' relation to space and mise-en-scene is one way of testing this intuition, and my basic opposition to Young.

### **Spaces of comedy and melodrama**

When I began this thesis, I was determined to limit myself to couples in romantic comedy. However, in writing about the Thin Man films, I became aware that their comic situations often alluded to melodrama, and to the threat that the fun of the comedy might be compromised by melodrama's trauma.<sup>55</sup> The question becomes yet more pressing with a consideration of *Penny Serenade* and *My Favourite Wife*, two films that purport to be comedies yet frequently verge upon something more tortured. In my fourth chapter, I look at narratives that draw upon motifs of the returning husband, as depicted in Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*. In so doing, I end my thesis with two films that are predominantly melodramatic in their address, *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Tomorrow is Forever*. Despite their very different tonal qualities, I suggest that these films share a genealogy with comedy and undertake a post-war reflection upon the films of the 1930s.

In *Beyond Genre*, Deborah Thomas advances the theory that 'the melodramatic and the comedic provide contrasting ways of structuring the space of the narrative world'.<sup>56</sup> Thomas suggests that melodrama is defined by its contrast between normative social space and alternative space, 'where social values and expectations to some extent break down'.<sup>57</sup> The repressed desire inherent in this structure makes space a metaphor for the lack of fulfilment, contrasting yet interdependent:

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<sup>55</sup> My review of the literature on detectives in film and literature can be found in chapter 1.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas, Deborah, *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



Both sorts of space give rise to their own characteristic fantasies. Thus, inherent in the normative social space, where men and women settle down together in marriage and domesticity, are corresponding male and female versions of fantasies which emphasise the struggles for dominance between men and women in what is a rigidly hierarchical world. [...] In contrast, the space of adventure away from the everyday social world embodies a fantasy of masculine escape where male toughness replaces augmentation: that is, fantasies of violent self-assertion replace those which offer a mere appearance of domination – a front for the outside world – within the marital and familial home.<sup>58</sup>

This rigid schema is opposed to comedy's transformative potential, in which 'the transformed communal space is more fluid with the romantic couple more integrated within it – a place of permeable boundaries and passage through them.'<sup>59</sup> Thomas argues that melodrama and comedy's distinct structuring of space reveals 'certain recurring fantasies centred around power (in melodramatic films) and a sort of transformative and liberating mutuality (in comedic ones)'.<sup>60</sup> Avoiding the tendency to attribute films to narrow genres, Thomas is particularly interested in films in which 'the melodramatic and the comedic come into conflict'<sup>61</sup> – thus, her corpus takes in *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942, Romaine) and *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993, Universal/Amblin).

Thomas suggests that secondary characters may represent the possibilities of other worlds encroaching upon the main narrative. Thus, while '[c]omedic films seem to have to strive continually to keep melodrama at bay',<sup>62</sup> ejecting it from its world, melodrama often displays a 'blindness to alternatives' as part of its 'pessimism and repressive atmosphere'.<sup>63</sup> For Thomas, '[r]omance is the fantasy common to both

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

the melodramatic and the comedic',<sup>64</sup> and the remainder of her book examines the fictional worlds created and implied by a series of Hollywood narratives of masculinity.

In a chapter on men in melodrama, Thomas looks at *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Jack Arnold, 1957, Universal), *Bigger Than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956, Twentieth Century Fox) and *Schindler's List*, concluding that 'the melodramatic narrative world says, 'This is how it is' (in terms, that is, of the blockage of desire within its hierarchically structured social domain) where the comedic world says, 'This is how it might be different'.'<sup>65</sup> In my fourth chapter, I examine two films (*The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Tomorrow is Forever*) that are widely taken to be melodramas or 'weepies'. These films both propose 'This is how it might be different', complicating Thomas' thesis that melodrama's repression of desire cannot contain the transformative. I argue that, in referencing pre-war Hollywood comedy, these melodramatic narratives offer a consideration not just of what once was, but what an imagined future could be.

Like Thomas, my reading of these films emphasises the ideals of romance and male-female harmony as a benign ambition of the American psyche. Indeed, Thomas' notion of generic structures has informed my use of textual analysis to illuminate the 'shifts and ambiguities'<sup>66</sup> between these registers. To those who would criticise my work for not separating comedy and melodrama more severely, I direct them to *Beyond Genre*. Assigning fixed generic categories to films encourages reductive readings – like Thomas, I have drawn attention to the 'intricate interplay

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-58.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

between melodramatic and comedic moments and spaces'<sup>67</sup> and suggested that this conversation is essential to the depiction of married romance.

*Beyond Genre*'s melodramatic case studies concentrate on masculinity, making the point that women are commonly sidelined within 'the melodramatic narrative world' and that they occupy a 'more lowly position within its hierarchies of power'.<sup>68</sup> Thomas contrasts melodramatic men, who are 'threatened by the prospect of surrendering to sexual desire and the domesticity it may entail because of the way such domestic containment diminishes their stature and undermines their privileged status' and comedic males who 'are much more positively served when they are toppled from such heights'.<sup>69</sup> By analysing a comedy of male regression, *Monkey Business* (Howard Hawks, 1952, Twentieth Century Fox), a comedy of heroism, *To Be or Not to Be*, and a romantic comedy, *The Palm Beach Story*, Thomas argues that 'the comedic world is hospitable to the characters' desires and facilitates their proper satisfaction'.<sup>70</sup>

In seeking to create a unifying theory of comedy and melodrama, Thomas occasionally draws problematically broad conclusions. Thus, in arguing that comedic happy endings frequently seem 'to be the result of a benevolent spirit offscreen', there is the danger of draining protagonists of much of their agency. Happy fate certainly structures many comedies, but not all – in the Thin Man films, for instance, our sense that the comedic world is 'safe'<sup>71</sup> rests largely on the self-assurance of the central couple. There is little of the transformative in these films (except that the social world is served by the capture of a murderer) despite comedy inflecting the melodramatic world of death and deception throughout.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Despite these reservations, my work has been greatly influenced by Thomas' close readings, which, in tracing the structures that connect genre and the social world, act as a model for the way that sensitive textual analysis can inform theory.

If melodramatic films present the social world as essentially repressive and rejecting of the romantic couple's expressions of mutual erotic desire (except in terms of a narrowly defined, constricted hierarchical model), with their private space under siege from the world outside, comedic films, by contrast, allow the positive eroticism of the romantic couple and the safety of the larger world – or at least, the immediate community, however that is defined – to coexist in a state of mutual hospitality.<sup>72</sup>

Moving the discussion of genre away from categorisation and toward narrative architecture is a considerable achievement, even if the opposition established by Thomas above may not neatly apply to my corpus. One of the ambitions of my work, then, is to examine melodramatic films' depiction of marriages that eschew the social world altogether (as in *Penny Serenade* and *Tomorrow is Forever*) and comedic films in which comfort and safety is not really at issue (as in the Thin Man films).

### **Spaces of performance**

A concern over the agency of stars and their characters in melodrama and comedy is taken up in the work of Andrew Britton. Writing in *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*, Britton observes,

The condition of the irreducibility of genres is precisely their historical reciprocity: in an apparently paradoxical but very real sense, they are different because of what they have in common, not in spite of it. The common ground is that profound conflict of interpretations within the culture – ineliminable because germane to the culture – which assigns conflicting meanings to a single term or set of terms. Each genre seeks to regulate this conflict by organising particular 'forms and keepings', and appropriate expectations, whereby specific manifestations and resolutions of contradiction appear as properties of the generic world.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>73</sup> Britton, Andrew, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist* (London: Studio Vista, 1995), p. 142.

This conception of genres as interdependent has been useful in my own study, the corpus of which has been partly determined by my interest in following star personae across genre. While Britton's work is more based in psychoanalysis than my own, I have found his discussion of stardom - in the book on Hepburn and his essay on Cary Grant - rewarding, especially in relation to the meaning of couples within their social environment. Britton argues that the 'star in his/her films must always be read as a dramatic presence which is predicated by, and which intervenes on, enormously complex and elaborate themes and motifs, and thereby refers us to a particular state of the social reality of genre, and of the relation between the genres'.<sup>74</sup> In this way, Britton affords equal weight to the discussion of star and genre, focusing upon their interplay.

Britton's chapter on Hepburn's films with Spencer Tracy<sup>75</sup> classifies this sequence as a 'cycle', a term I have avoided in discussing the diegetically-linked Thin Man films. In relation to Hepburn and Tracy, 'cycle' permits an exploration of key themes across films that accommodate the contexts of Hepburn's previous screen pairing with Cary Grant, and other prominent screen couples of the time like Astaire and Rogers and Bogart and Bacall. Britton asserts that these couples can be distinguished as either 'romantic' or 'democratic'.<sup>76</sup> Within the former, he identifies a further sub-division 'according to whether or not the couple's romanticism is regarded as normative',<sup>77</sup> a distinction which addresses the 'implicit disharmony between sexual romanticism and the institution of marriage'.<sup>78</sup> This contradiction manifests itself either as the suppression of marriage or the projection of it into an undetermined future. Concomitant with this is a diminished attention to social equality, which is

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 169-208.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

‘voided by asserting either that the existing social arrangements are absolutely inimical to, and repressive of, love, or that love alone can guarantee their authenticity and realise their essential spirit, the nature and content of “love” being, in both cases, understood and unquestioned’.<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, Britton’s ‘democratic’ couples appear in ‘films [that] argue that the inequalities to which they point can be rectified within the status quo’.<sup>80</sup> Their narratives can be seen as a meditation upon bourgeois civilisation, and frequently an endorsement of its values and containment of its ambiguities. Thus, Britton sees the Hepburn-Tracy cycle as ‘the corollary of the impossibility, within the Hollywood cinema, of the more radical tendency of Hepburn and Grant, who raise too disturbingly the prospect of a radical reconception of what bourgeois sexuality experiences as castration,’<sup>81</sup> undermining Hepburn’s feminist agency and reinstating her within the patriarchal couple.

Britton divides the cycle generically, as melodramas and comedies, revealing his political affiliations by condemning the former’s ‘uniform badness’<sup>82</sup> and endorsing the (to use Thomas’ term) potentially transformative nature of comedy. This leads him to make what is in my view a baffling, and flawed, judgement on the relative merits of the Hepburn-Tracy comedies. Deploring the self-consciousness of *Pat and Mike* (George Cukor, 1952, MGM), the conservatism of *Woman of the Year* (George Stevens, 1942, MGM), and troubled by the compromise of *Adam’s Rib* (George Cukor, 1949, MGM), Britton plumps for *Desk Set* (Walter Lang, 1957, Twentieth Century Fox) as the ‘best’ of the cycle.<sup>83</sup> However, in championing ‘its central theme of the conflict of capital and labour’ and ‘its emphasis on the spiritual

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

education of male conservatism',<sup>84</sup> Britton fails to account for the aesthetic torpor of the movie, or for its screenplay's over-emphatic statement of its themes. For Britton, 'the values embodied in the star personae are organised into a genuine dialectic'; for me, this dialectic frequently strains credibility through its directness. I take Britton's value for *Desk Set* as a warning against the temptation to prize films when they affirm one's own beliefs. Wisely, Britton acknowledges the possibility of overstating these elements when he writes, of *Desk Set*, that 'the resolution of its themes is far more conservative than I have implied above'.<sup>85</sup>

### Couples and cycles

Edward Gallafent's study of *Astaire and Rogers* discusses a screen couple in terms of the progress of their cycle, charting the cultural context of their films together and apart, concluding with their reunion in *The Barkleys of Broadway* (Charles Walters, 1949, MGM). In connecting stardom and genre in a discussion of a screen couple cycle, this work has been a valuable model for my own analysis not just of the Thin Man films, but also of Myrna Loy's later roles in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

Gallafent turns his attention to the non-musical segments of the Astaire-Rogers cycle, suggesting that 'the dance sequences answer questions raised elsewhere and raise other questions which it will be the business of the film to answer'.<sup>86</sup> This consideration of the thematic interests of the films' plots allows Gallafent 'to examine how the Astaire and Rogers films, which were produced and originally viewed as a series, relate to one another'.<sup>87</sup> There is an obvious parallel to be made here with my

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>86</sup> Gallafent, Edward, *Astaire and Rogers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 6-7.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

treatment of the Thin Man series, in which the issues are somewhat different for being about a continuous set of characters. In his introduction, Gallafent acknowledges a debt to Cavell, but their methodology and style of writing is quite different. Gallafent avoids sweeping philosophical truths in favour of close textual analysis and attention to the tonal qualities of moments. In doing so, he builds up a compelling account of the progress of this film series.

Central to this approach is an attention to how the film addresses us as viewers. For example, the discussion of the first Astaire and Rogers film, *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933, RKO), begins with the observation that

its audience and its producers could not know of the films to come with which we associate it, and if conditions had arisen to prevent the making of another movie with these two actors, there would be no light thrown upon it by the rest of the cycle. The question, then, is what made audiences think they might like to see this pair on screen again?<sup>88</sup>

Gallafent answers this question by noting the ways in which Astaire and Rogers, and the fun that ensues from their teaming, are associated with the transformation of a mundane world into an euphoric fantasy space, and a way of being ordinary together. Noting qualities of performance and costume, this analysis of the film acts as a stepping off point for a film-by-film comparison, which builds in meaning as the series goes on.

Gallafent distinguishes between dancing as performance and dancing as expression of private feeling. Using the metaphor of dance as flight developed in his account of *Flying Down to Rio*, Gallafent notes that

Their seduction of each other always depends on their dancing together, and involves a degree of abandonment of their sense of themselves as professionals and of their dance as just a professional skill, a withdrawal from a social context in which the world is divided into performers and audiences. It becomes the business of the film to explore how the couple find their way back to the social world, or the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 12.



solid ground, that is represented by institutions like marriage and divorce.<sup>89</sup>

This journey back to the social world presents a different prospect than the conclusions of the films Cavell discusses as ‘remarriage comedies’. In those films, the couple remove themselves from society, creating a space in which they can renegotiate their marriage. Each of those marriages ends with an ellipsis, assuring us that the marriage is healthier, but only in its removal from society. Gallafent examines the spaces portrayed in the early Astaire-Rogers films, noting the tension between quotidian London and that of seaside resort Brightburn (which he likens to a Shakespearean ‘green world’) in *The Gay Divorcée* (Mark Sandrich, 1934, RKO), and the more prevalent fantasy worlds of *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935, RKO), which seem to make the search for ordinary space even more pressing.

This attention to the expressive spaces in which a marriage (or its precursor) is acted out, and the detailed reading of mise-en-scene, has strongly influenced my work. The relevance of this approach to the study of series is dictated by the return to significant spaces, and the corresponding changes in meaning these reveal.

Marriages, like film cycles, continue, and Gallafent describes the ongoing nature of the films as anticipating ‘the return to the everyday world that marks the end of comedy’.<sup>90</sup> This trace of melancholy is very different to the promise of social transgression evoked at the end of many remarriage comedies, and for Gallafent, it anticipates an acknowledgement of the end of the series. From *Swing Time* (George Stevens, 1936, RKO) onwards, ‘the couple’s lengthening history as dance partners will be acknowledged, and the tension will emanate from the sense of an ending, the

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

anticipation or the enactment of the breakdown of the couple's dancing lives together.'<sup>91</sup>

Gallafent insists upon the interconnection of the cycle, and of its overall coherence. Thus, in *Top Hat* 'the earlier films of the cycle deepen the meaning and extend the possibilities of the plot'.<sup>92</sup> In *Follow the Fleet* (Mark Sandrich, 1936, RKO), elements of self-consciousness speak to an audience familiar with the conventions of the series, adding to the 'slowly growing weight of their previous films'.<sup>93</sup> Most importantly, the progress of the cycle charts a movement through various worlds, each responsive to the development of the screen couple, concluding with *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (H. C. Potter, 1939, RKO) from which there 'is nowhere that dance can proceed to or return from'.<sup>94</sup> The Astaire character's death in this film brings the cycle to a close.

Courtney A. Grimm's MA thesis on Powell and Loy compares the Thin Man series to two other films featuring the stars, *I Love You Again* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1940, MGM) and *Love Crazy* (Jack Conway, 1941, MGM). Grimm argues that the initial subversion of Nick and Nora is eroded by the onset of domestication, a position indebted to Martha P. Nochimson (see below). While there is no sustained engagement with the mystery plots of the Thin Man series, Grimm notes the 'combining [of] genres' as a crucial factor in the films' appeal.<sup>95</sup> Quoting Shumway, she criticises Cavell's disinterest in remarriage comedies as Depression fables, arguing that *I Love You Again* and *Love Crazy* respond to 'a social need to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>95</sup> Grimm, Courtney A., *The Arranged Marriage of William Powell and Myrna Loy: How Nick and Nora Didn't Solve the Marriage Problem* (unpublished thesis: Ohio University, 2008), p. 51. <<http://etd.ohiolink.edu/view.cgi/Grimm%20Courtney.pdf?ohiou1226613637>>, accessed 3 August 2011.

cinematically demonstrate a happy resolution to the heartbreak of divorce'.<sup>96</sup> Grimm views a decline in the Thin Man series as reflecting a changing social environment and, while I do not agree with her thesis or her estimation of these films, I am grateful for her attention to the rarely discussed later films.

### **Performance: Virginia Wright Wexman**

Critical studies of film acting are comparatively scarce, and those that address the screen couple scarcer still. Much of the literature that does exist treats the subject at an anecdotal level, celebrating but not analysing the interaction of personae.<sup>97</sup> In the following sections headed 'Performance', I consider three approaches to writing about acting in film.

In *Creating the Couple*, Virginia Wright Wexman examines 'the relationship between specific Hollywood performers and developments in American society',<sup>98</sup> with emphasis on changing historical conceptions of love and companionate marriage. Wexman seeks to posit 'romantic love and marriage as social ideologies', considering how 'the relationship between performance styles and discourses surrounding the body emphasises the significance of specific historical moments'.<sup>99</sup>

Wexman rejects the assumed ahistorical nature of Freudian theory in favour of a model of cultural conditioning that draws upon anthropology.<sup>100</sup> Identifying three variables deployed in Hollywood films, 'evolving ideologies concerning romantic

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>97</sup> A seminal work of this type is Kanin, Garson, *Tracy and Hepburn: An Intimate Memoir* (New York: Bantam, 1972). For coffee-table histories of the screen couple, see Miller, Frank, *Leading Couples* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2008); Sunshine, Linda, *Lovers* (London: Virgin, 1992); and Soares, J. C., *Hollywood Weddings* (Charlottesville: Thomasson-Grant, 1994).

<sup>98</sup> Wexman, Virginia Wright, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. ix-x.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

coupling, narrative patterns, and acting technique’,<sup>101</sup> Wexman suggests that stars act as behavioural models for audiences, reflecting and influencing contemporary perceptions of romantic relationships. As a result, audience pleasure in the erotic display of the performers disguises ‘the historical and cultural factors involved in the creation of the couple’.<sup>102</sup> Wexman builds her argument in four sections, examining (1) the construction of stardom in relation to reception, (2) traditional gender identity in relation to stars who promote patriarchal values (looking specifically at the Griffith-Gish collaboration and the Westerns of John Wayne), (3) a critique of Hollywood construction of female glamour and an analysis of Method masculinity, and (4) an enquiry into the destabilisation of gender norms in post-classical Hollywood.

Somewhat problematically, in focusing on the dialogue between individual stars and their social construction, Wexman avoids any sustained engagement with the interplay of star couples. Thus, in positing Humphrey Bogart as an exemplar of a hard-boiled romantic hero, Wexman undertakes a detailed consideration of the social and intertextual factors that contributed to his persona, following this with a meticulous analysis of his physical and gestural presence.<sup>103</sup> However, in failing to repeat this process for Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* or Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*, one feels that Wexman misses a chance to address the dynamic repartee that makes these pairings great. This leads her to generalise in a manner that does not account for the differences between screen couples, as when she refers to the ‘convention of representing weddings (or the promise of weddings) as the culmination

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-36.

of its romantic-love fantasies; thus romantic love after marriage need not be portrayed'.<sup>104</sup>

Wexman contends that societal attitudes toward marriage shape the persona of individual stars, but shows little interest in how such forces might influence star pairings. Thus, an analysis of John Wayne's 'association with the American mythology of nationalism'<sup>105</sup> argues that the 'concept of dynastic marriage'<sup>106</sup> and the association of the American landscape with 'the female body'<sup>107</sup> are integral to the conception of the Western hero. However, the use of these suggestive notions to illustrate Wayne's embodiment of patriarchy elides how they might apply to the performances of actresses as varied as, say, Maureen O'Hara and Angie Dickinson.

Similarly, Wexman's thesis that female star glamour masks a contradiction in which 'beauty is understood as at once "glamorous" and "natural" – in other words, as both constructed and unconstructed'<sup>108</sup> constantly threatens to reduce performance to societal response. At worst, female stars are 'models of heterosexual companionship while retaining their status as passive images of beauty and romantic desirability'<sup>109</sup>; at best, they expose 'the myth of the inevitability of the companionate couple' and 'the historical realities of the power of the movie love goddess'.<sup>110</sup> Again, the danger here seems to me to be in *defining* female stardom as subject to these social formulations. In the chapters that follow, while I have remained mindful of the construction of glamour, I have also attended to the detail of moments that speak more to the action of the plot than the contemporary social climate. Put simply, I am

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

uneasy about theory that restricts female performance to the discussion of victimisation.

The study concludes with a discussion of Method acting as a response to a post-war ‘ambivalent obsession with male power’<sup>111</sup> and a consideration of recent societal trends that move the idea of marriage away from the companionate form and towards ‘an ephemeral idea of personal fulfillment’,<sup>112</sup> expressed through improvisational, absurdist and Brechtian performance styles. As a theoretical approach to the study of film performance, then, Wexman’s book is thorough and provocative; it just doesn’t have much to do with couples.

### **Performance: James Naremore**

In *Acting in the Cinema*, Naremore argues that, in striving for transparency, film acting has ‘ideological importance’.<sup>113</sup> Naremore defines this claim with recourse to a tension in film performance between the realist impulse and ‘a degree of ostensiveness that marks it off from quotidian behaviour’.<sup>114</sup> As a result, writing about film acting is difficult ‘without falling back on unwieldy tables of statistics or fuzzy, adjectival language’,<sup>115</sup> since the fluid nature of gesture and expression aims to convince us of its aptitude to the filmic situation.

Like Wexman, Naremore is inclined to position the audience as passive and rapt, as when he writes, ‘one of the common pleasures of moviegoing derives from our feeling that an actor is doing something remarkable’, citing ‘[John] Garfield playing poker, [Humphrey] Bogart nodding his head, a minor player in a crowded

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>113</sup> Naremore, James, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

scene' as examples of quotidian behaviour dramatically transformed.<sup>116</sup> The appeal of these moments results from the way that cinema “constructs” its spectators more rigorously than any form of theatre’.<sup>117</sup>

For Naremore, film acting is often a matter of representation, in which performances are intended for an audience that the actors pretend not to acknowledge.<sup>118</sup> Naremore repeatedly returns to the idea of film acting as a performance of ordinariness, referring to it as ‘a compromise between “obviousness” and “doing nothing”’,<sup>119</sup> mimicking ‘well-known forms of behaviour’,<sup>120</sup> ‘doing nothing extremely well’,<sup>121</sup> and making ‘significant faces and gestures visible, important dialogue audible’.<sup>122</sup> Effective film performance depends upon modulating behaviour to suit the various ways in which the human body may be filmed, ‘an ability to suggest disorder by means of orderliness – thereby letting us see the distance between a character who is awkward and a player who is in full theatrical control’.<sup>123</sup> Taking the example of James Stewart repeating a gesture in *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954, Paramount) and *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958, Paramount), Naremore writes that ‘actors continue to practice the rhetoric of conventionalised expression [...] [with] a greater emphasis on the idiolect of the performer’.<sup>124</sup> Naremore’s study takes in the use of props, costume and make-up as expressive elements, but he stresses the potential of the human body to control these elements, subjugating them to the most expressive element of all – the actor’s features, ‘a field

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

of signs prepared for a viewer, so conventionalised as to become a “mythology” or an invisible ideology’.<sup>125</sup>

Naremore stresses duality as a signifier of skill, in which ‘the player demonstrates virtuosity by sending out dual signs, and the vivid contrast between facial expressions gives the “acted image” an emotional richness, a strong sense of dramatic irony’.<sup>126</sup> This is demonstrated in a series of performance studies of: Lillian Gish (‘the actor’s job involves *combining* conventional expressions [...] so that the shot has a slightly ambiguous effect’),<sup>127</sup> Marlene Dietrich (‘a star who *acted* stardom’),<sup>128</sup> James Cagney ([*Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938, Warner Bros.)] ‘is intent on devising new structural relations between Cagney’s celebrity, his fictional role and his acting skills’),<sup>129</sup> Katharine Hepburn, Marlon Brando and Cary Grant. The bracketed quotations give some indication of Naremore’s emphasis on ambiguous and multiple meanings. His study of Charlie Chaplin is perhaps the most interesting, with its suggestion of a symbiotic relationship between Mack Sennett’s square-on compositions and Chaplin’s ‘precise, quick, and rigid’ movements.<sup>130</sup> Again, there is the emphasis upon duality, but this is tied into a consideration of style – the closeness or distance of the camera from Chaplin: thus, describing a ‘situation pitched near to real horror’, Naremore notes that ‘the camera watches Chaplin from a relatively close vantage’.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 125.



## Performance: Andrew Klevan

A more nuanced treatment of acting and its meanings comes from Andrew Klevan, who treats ‘performance as an internal element of style in synthesis with other aspects of film style and explores the achievement of expressive rapport’.<sup>132</sup> Klevan’s approach is useful in that it seeks not to isolate acting as an element but rather celebrates performances that ‘have the patience and humility, in tune with the medium’s encouragements, to inhabit an appropriate place’.<sup>133</sup> Following the example of Cavell and V. F. Perkins, Klevan locates performance as an active, yet collaborative, agent in the creation of meaning and affect.

Basic to this is an appreciation of actors’ skills not just as interpreters of dialogue, but as performers of movement, repositioning scenes with details of gesture and expression. This is antithetical to Naremore’s reliance upon standardised pantomime, which assumes a codified register of emotions. Klevan, in contrast, stresses the diversity of both performance and reception:

Because many Hollywood performances are examining the ‘hyperbolic’, for example exploring the extremities of sentiment, the viewer need not only be absorbed, or overwhelmed, by the *character*’s emotions, or ‘identify’ or empathise with them. The viewer may simultaneously engage with the *performer*’s handling of these heightened emotional states. In Hollywood cinema, not only do (apparent) clichés of sentiment or emotionalism entertain; they are also entertained, and redeemed.<sup>134</sup>

Klevan’s use of the word ‘apparent’ is important, acknowledging intentionality on the part of filmmakers and an audience’s complex response.

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<sup>132</sup> Klevan, Andrew, *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. xii.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

My textual analysis has been influenced by Klevan's approach,<sup>135</sup> which might be summarised as: 'Rhythm, achieved by carefully timing the interaction of elements, is crucial to all the great film performers'.<sup>136</sup> In attending to the 'moment-by-moment movement of performers',<sup>137</sup> this analysis of performance defines the ways in which gesture is 'appropriated, or else adjusted or modulated by the [film's] developing behavioural and attitudinal patterns'.<sup>138</sup> The great value of this approach is in its methodological coherence: Klevan uses the 'adjectival prose' that Naremore worried over to 'attend to a character's physical and aural detail', reminding us of 'their ontological particularity in the medium of film'. Crucial to this method of film writing is the understanding that, rather than a series of signifiers, '[a] living human being embodies a film character'.<sup>139</sup>

Klevan's appreciation is not just aesthetic, then, but also technical. Appreciating 'the performer's capacities for revealing and withholding aspects of the character's sensibility'<sup>140</sup> is dependent upon an understanding that the 'eloquence of the moment is achieved by the performer's bearing in conjunction with the position of the camera'.<sup>141</sup> For Klevan, analysis and pleasure are not opposed: indeed, he observes that '[o]ne of the challenges of film study is to evoke in words a medium that is primarily visual and aural, and *moving*'.<sup>142</sup> I take those italics to confer a double meaning, communicating not just motion but also emotional affect.

While Klevan does not address the star couple directly, his interest in film sequences that 'are especially attentive to the performers' positions in relation to each

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<sup>135</sup> I should mention here Klevan's paper, 'Responding to the Moment', given at the *Stanley Cavell and Literary Criticism* conference, 10 May 2008, which encouraged me to pursue my own close readings.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

other; developing, and deepening, arrangements'<sup>143</sup> has deepened my understanding of the ways that mutuality is performed onscreen. Similarly his observation that 'appreciation of a performance may encourage us to reorganise a film's elements and shift our perspective on the action'<sup>144</sup> has informed my discussion of Bianca in *My Favourite Wife* and Marie in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, revealing 'new aspects that were previously, necessarily, subdued'.<sup>145</sup>

There is a danger, perhaps, in assigning too great an importance to performance, in the hope of opening up 'alternative interpretations that reveal a better film'.<sup>146</sup> However, this is a matter of judgement, a codicil to the truth that actors do not just enact plot, but react against it, 'authenticating their characters while deceiving us',<sup>147</sup> generating ambiguity by portraying not just 'the explicit stories which characters try to control' but also 'the stories that are controlling them'.<sup>148</sup>

Klevan has significantly influenced my approach to textual analysis, using the delicacies of performance to inflect my readings, returning again and again to what seem to me to be significant moments:

Continuous attention to sequences [...] brings out the relationship between appreciating a performance and understanding a film's meaning as it *develops* – the unfolding of an interpretation – undermining our inclination to condense and compress meanings of films, often to the point of banality. Established understandings may then be substantially deepened – or unseated. This method also requires that we slow down, stop, and dwell, so that we can savour the intensity of an interaction, an intonation or an expression – the reverberations – and reflect (on) the resonance.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

My expressive prose draws on Klevan's example, aiming to 'evoke the films and interpret them at the same time', reflecting 'the manner of the films where what they mean is what they are and what they do'.<sup>150</sup>

### **Defining 'chemistry'**

What makes a successful screen couple? In a study that takes in classical Hollywood and recent television, Martha P. Nochimson defines 'chemistry' as a form of cultural resistance. Nochimson identifies four categories, comparatively rating the couples under discussion. The Functional Couple describes a screen pairing with little or no chemistry - 'such pairs, though they may have some degree of star power, tend to reiterate empty cliché'.<sup>151</sup> The Iconic Couple is a variant of the Functional Couple, in which 'star power that gilds tired old clichés'<sup>152</sup> compensates for the conventional Hollywood product. The Synergistic Couple is, for Nochimson, the apogee of classical Hollywood's achievement in terms of screen chemistry, being a pairing which 'exerted a disruptive influence on the formulaic elements in the film and emerged from an unpredictable process of combination, a multiplication process in which a third entity was created, a hyphenated entity'.<sup>153</sup> These couples rise above 'the ideological stranglehold of entertainment',<sup>154</sup> the synergistic juxtaposition of the two actors creating meaning as 'two forms of idealization are brought into collision in a way that stimulates vision and thought'.<sup>155</sup> Nochimson concludes by discussing televisual examples of Synergistic Couples (e.g. David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson in *The X-Files*) and her fourth category, post-studio system Thematic

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>151</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry: the Power of 2* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

Couples. Recalling Wexman's discussion of self-reflexive acting styles, Thematic Couples express 'contemporary anxieties and identity crises', 'generating new and genuinely improved formulas that mark out territory at the border of what is considered acceptable, but at the conservative side of the border'.<sup>156</sup> The line of inheritance drawn between film and television is generally unconvincing, with Nochimson's analysis of Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad in *The Cosby Show* (Casey-Werner/Viacom/NBC, 1984-1992) and Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd in *Moonlighting* (Picturemaker/ABC, 1985-1989) showing up the flaws in the book's rigid taxonomy of stardom.

I quote Nochimson numerous times in this thesis, invariably to disagree with her. Here, then, I will not detail her discussion of couples – I do so more fully in the following chapters – but will content myself by establishing a methodological distance from Nochimson. In her opening thesis statements, Nochimson writes,

Each of these couples was bigger than the films they made together, the beauty of their several rapports seeming to break free from the constraints of any particular story, the relationship itself becoming a freestanding energy vortex.<sup>157</sup>

In asserting the separation of her Synergistic Couples from the texts they occupy, Nochimson frequently slips into cod-mystical language. 'Energy' is a recurring word, ill defined save for a sense that it opposes the repressive machinery of the studio system. Nochimson associates the latter with narrative, which she sees as being resisted by the image of Synergistic Couples, as when she suggests that 'absorption of simple plots was and is more consumer-friendly than a complex modernist formation of narrative out of the juxtaposition of images' and that 'the power of the visual

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

reasserted by star chemistry can sometimes work not against meaning but against the reductiveness of the mass culture story'.<sup>158</sup>

In the following chapters, I attend to the physical presence of actors together, an indubitably important aspect of the screen couple. However, I argue that these images work in tandem with narrative, the latter often commenting on the former (see my discussion of the opening and closing images of *Penny Serenade*, for example).

This is quite unlike Nochimson's approach, which contends that

The narratives of the films of the Synergistic Couples might easily be analysed for formulaic elements, but none of the routine story elements was particularly instrumental in the success of the film. In fact, what was characteristic of Synergistic Couples was that their energy tended to disrupt the formulas in interesting ways so as to create highly distinctive perspectives on the social practices embedded in the usual narrative pattern.<sup>159</sup>

Without diminishing the impact of stars, one of the aims of my thesis is to champion the intelligence of those working behind the camera. To take one example, while Nochimson's thesis denigrates the contributions of skilled writers like Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett, Robert Riskin et al., my work explores these screenplays' interaction with, and commentary upon, performance.

This is not to suggest that Nochimson's argument is worthless. Indeed, in emphasising 'documentary elements in the image', which she claims 'go beyond socially devised languages and systems',<sup>160</sup> Nochimson contributes to the discourse around quotidian behaviour expressed by Naremore and Klevan. However, her route to this conclusion is somewhat eccentric, drawing upon neuroscience to argue that screen couple chemistry 'produces a cycle of relationship between image and concept so rapid that it comes as close as we can ever come to infusing an uncoded experience

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

into the meaning of the Hollywood movie',<sup>161</sup> and devoting an appendix to 'Theorizing Chemistry in Entertainment via Neuroscience'.<sup>162</sup>

The divergence in my methodology and Nochimson's can be attributed to our very different assumptions about the worth of Hollywood films. I have approached the films in my corpus first for their individual achievements, then for their place in a wider intertextual framework. I would argue that Nochimson's four categories of screen couple are reductive and restrictive, blinding her to the complexities of the films in question. This leads Nochimson to diminish differences between texts, best illustrated by her simplistic movement from classical Hollywood to 1980s and 1990s network television.

This problematic cross-media analysis similarly hampers Tom Soter's work on couples in the Thin Man films and, on television, *The Avengers* (ITV/ABC/Thames, 1961-1969) and *The X-Files* (Ten Thirteen/Fox Television, 1993-2002). Soter proposes key areas of similarity - the couples' chemistry, the series' reflection of their historical context, and the unique combinations of generic elements and narrative formulae. However, an unsophisticated reliance on the subversive aspects of these couples leads to the weak conclusion that '*The Thin Man*, *The Avengers*, and *The X-Files* are each ultimately, about one universal belief: that true friendship can last forever and that it can be the most central and meaningful part of a person's life'.<sup>163</sup>

### **Marriage and its contexts: Kathrina Glitre**

Kathrina Glitre resolves many of the critical contradictions around the depiction of marriage. Reclaiming screwball from Shumway's assumption of

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 325-328.

<sup>163</sup> Soter, Tom, *Investigating couples: a critical analysis of The Thin Man, The Avengers and The X-Files* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), p. 148.

patriarchal affirmation, Glitre identifies a 'progressive critique and reform of an outmoded version of the institution'<sup>164</sup> over three decades in which equality is a prevalent issue. As Glitre explains, in various cycles of Hollywood romantic comedy - 'screwball comedy in the thirties; the career woman in the forties; and the sex comedy in the fifties'<sup>165</sup> – recurring narrative structures function differently, so that the heterosexual couple embodies variant meanings. In this respect, Glitre's work undermines critical reliance on ideological 'norms',<sup>166</sup> using critical, historical and cultural contexts as a stimulus for close textual analysis.<sup>167</sup>

Nominating marriage, equality and desire as preoccupations of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, Glitre explores these discourses by examining the films of representative star couples: Loy and Powell; Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy; and Doris Day and Rock Hudson. Through a comparative analysis, Glitre challenges not just the assumptions of Frye and Cavell, but also the rebuttals of Shumway. Glitre's formulations seem even more convincing for their grounding in social context.

Running through this argument is a feminist determination that, *contra* Cavell, 'It is the man who must learn to acknowledge the woman's desire and the education that takes place does not necessarily demand the woman's 'emergence' as an autonomous being, but the man's recognition of her existing autonomy'.<sup>168</sup> Glitre notes the 'patriarchal assumption'<sup>169</sup> of Cavell's premise that an educating man leads a woman to acknowledge her own desires, representative of a 'general critical

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<sup>164</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, 'The Same, But Different: The Awful Truth About Marriage, Remarriage and Screwball', *CineAction*, 54 (January 2001), p. 6.

<sup>165</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood romantic comedy*, p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>169</sup> For Cavell's defence against Tania Modleski's charge of 'postfeminist irony', see 'Editorial Notes', *Critical Inquiry* 17: 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 237-244.



tendency to posit the female as the “problem” in screwball comedy’.<sup>170</sup> In Glitre’s reading, screwball generally dictates the need for ‘*mutual* re-education’,<sup>171</sup> involving a ‘disavowal of romance’ in which the couple ‘come to appreciate each other through their shared misadventures’.<sup>172</sup> Noting that many of the comedies do not feature a consummating kiss that ‘conforms with conventional understanding of the power structures of the gendered look’,<sup>173</sup> Glitre argues that the camera’s distance from screwball embraces and the avoidance of shot/reverse shot editing reveals these films’ ideological position:

The screwball embrace offers quite a different spatial representation, symbolizing the equality of the couple. The couple face each other, not the camera, creating a balanced division of frame space; indeed, they are often seated, de-emphasizing the male’s height, so that the couple’s heads are relatively level.<sup>174</sup>

An emphasis on reinvention allows Glitre to refute Shumway’s claims of social repression, indicating rather that the couples in these films are constantly in ‘flux’, and ‘must keep on playing, keep on reinventing themselves, and keep on learning to love each other’.<sup>175</sup>

Writing of screwball, Glitre observes the recurrent emphasis on privacy, publicity and the processes of mass communication.<sup>176</sup> Indeed, it is the relation to society which defines screwball, recasting Frye’s ‘green world’ ‘as a contrast between dehumanising, urban existence and liberating, pastoral play’ in which ‘there is little sense of social renewal and the couple tend to remain unreconciled with their original society’.<sup>177</sup> This problematic relationship between the couple and society is also a

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<sup>170</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood romantic comedy*, p. 51.

<sup>171</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, ‘The Same, But Different’, p. 9.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>175</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood romantic comedy*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-69.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

feature of the career woman comedy, which Glitre discusses in terms of gender equality. Glitre notes a number of ways in which ‘the social construction of gender difference’<sup>178</sup> is used to ‘restore’ femininity to women termed unnatural.<sup>179</sup> However, despite the insistence of male dominance (manifest in a renewed interest in passionate kissing), Glitre argues that the ambiguity of the film’s endings allows audiences ‘to read against the grain’.<sup>180</sup> Similarly, a discussion of male and female desire in sex comedies of the 1950s uses consumerism to show that ‘by recognising the limitations of consumerism – its reliance on image and artifice – the sex comedy [...] suggests that the object of desire can never fulfil the subject’s idealised expectations’.<sup>181</sup> As a result, seduction and love are distinguished, with the latter presented as ‘natural’, even magical.<sup>182</sup>

In her conclusion, Glitre points to the desirability of the couple relationship, re-stating the importance of the liminal spaces that represent an escape from society, that ‘enable the extraordinary couple to get away with non-patriarchal heterosexuality’.<sup>183</sup> Glitre ends her account with the observation that the idealised nature of the romantic couple allows for an evasion of societal inequalities: ‘The material realities of institutionalised social inequality are displaced on to the personal realm, where the ephemeral power of ‘love’ magically enables individual equality without the need for systemic change’.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-105.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-110.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

## 1. Partners in Crime: marriage and mystery in the film series

### *The Thin Man* *After the Thin Man* *Another Thin Man*

‘What fun it will be,’ responded Tuppence. ‘Marriage is called all sorts of things, a haven, a refuge and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage, and lots more. But do you know what I think it is?’

‘What?’

‘A sport!’

‘And a damned good sport too,’ said Tommy.<sup>185</sup>

The Thin Man series is the most sustained depiction of happy marriage in Hollywood film. Between 1934 and 1947, audiences revelled in the crime-solving antics of the sophisticated and wealthy Nick and Nora Charles. However, while the screwball era has amassed a vast body of critical literature, these six movies have rarely been the subject of serious scholarship. The writing that does exist compares Nick and Nora to other screwball couples, playing down the films’ mystery plots. Overwhelmingly, these studies focus upon ‘the mutual pleasure and trust William Powell and Myrna Loy give one another’.<sup>186</sup>

One of the few dissenting voices comes from Jeanine Basinger, who questions the popular memory of the Thin Man film series as ‘the perfect movie marriage’.<sup>187</sup> Basinger links gender inequality to genre, citing examples of Nick Charles’s exclusion of his wife Nora from the ‘fun’ of the mystery investigations<sup>188</sup> and concluding,

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<sup>185</sup> Christie, Agatha, *The Secret Adversary* (London: Planet Three, 2002), p. 256.

<sup>186</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *The World Viewed, enlarged edition* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 5. Listing fond memories of boyhood visits to the cinema, Cavell beautifully characterises affection as a gift. What people remember about the series, and why, is an implicit concern of my first two chapters.

<sup>187</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 319.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

the movies of the Thin Man series are not women's films. They aren't even screwball comedies about marriage. They are stylish, well written and performed murder mysteries, with little touches of quirky behaviour and married romance.<sup>189</sup>

Separating the series' generic elements is a common strategy for commentators on the Thin Man films. James Harvey's chapter on Powell and Loy is exemplary in the way that it establishes two operative modes:

All those plot things needed at the very least to keep a movie going are taken care of in the *Thin Man* series by the "case". And the low level of energy and inspiration of these mystery plots allows the two stars to be comfortably, even happily uninvolved with them as they are with the murders themselves. Nick and Nora are untouched by action; they're involved in a state of being.<sup>190</sup>

In this reading, 'the real point of the films'<sup>191</sup> resides in the pleasures of the marriage comedy, permitted by the displacement of plot onto a disposable mystery narrative.<sup>192</sup>

I am reminded of Arlene Croce's observation that *Roberta* (William A. Seiter, 1935, RKO) 'came as close to plotlessness as that ideal Astaire-Rogers musical we all like to think they should have made'<sup>193</sup>, and Edward Gallaferri's musing over 'whether such a thing [would] be desirable or even tolerable'.<sup>194</sup> Echoing Gallaferri, my aim in these first two chapters is to show that interaction with the mystery plots, and their lively supporting casts, defines the social world of Nick and Nora's warm exchange.

I am uneasy with the idea that the mystery narrative is implicitly less valuable, and in service to, character comedy. My own position is indebted to Kathrina Glitre, who conceptualises this relationship as a distinction between narrative and spectacle, writing,

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>190</sup> Harvey, James, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 179.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Over the course of my doctoral study, I have introduced these films to many of my friends, who have similarly dismissed the mystery plots. While this has been disheartening, it has strengthened my resolve to speak up for the importance of narrative in these films.

<sup>193</sup> Croce, Arlene, *The Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972), p. 83.

<sup>194</sup> Gallaferri, Edward, *Astaire and Rogers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 6.

Narratives need conflict and change. Consequently, Nick and Nora's relationship exists in juxtaposition with a conventional murder mystery plot; their happy moments do not advance the story, but function as a form of spectacle, arresting – even supplanting – the causal chain of events.<sup>195</sup>

Glitre's argument usefully highlights the tension between comic spectacle and narrative form, which I take to be a structuring precept of the Thin Man series. In this chapter, I analyse the nature of 'juxtaposition' in the first three Thin Man films, arguing for a more integrated view of spectacle and narrative. I wish to redress the partiality of film studies' discussion of these movies. In the passage quoted above, Basinger astutely notes the academic impulse to categorise these films in accordance with dominant tendencies in Hollywood criticism.<sup>196</sup> This has led to a denigration of the films' mystery elements, so that their importance to the depiction of marriage has been overlooked.

The most extreme example of this approach comes from Martha P. Nochimson, who posits that the series' value resides in the social transgression of William Powell and Myrna Loy's comic interaction, which 'disrupts the storytelling sufficiently to reveal plot as well as cultural clichés for what they are'.<sup>197</sup> In effect, Nochimson's thesis suggests that the lead performances are most successful when they provide a commentary on the inadequacy of the films' plots. Citing Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Nochimson attributes negligible intelligence or awareness to filmmakers of the classical Hollywood system.<sup>198</sup>

It is my contention, *contra* Nochimson, that the mystery narratives in the Thin Man series inform and indeed structure the relationship of Nick and Nora, and that the

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<sup>195</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: states of the union 1934-1965* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 83-84.

<sup>196</sup> For example, Glitre considers the series from a post-Cavellian romantic comedy perspective.

<sup>197</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry: the Power of 2* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 87.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

films display a strikingly self-conscious attitude toward the architecture of the detective story. With this in mind, I wish to briefly consider the conventions of the mystery story in prose and film before moving onto my discussion of the first three Thin Man movies.

### **The seduction of crime**

Histories of the English-language detective story tend to acknowledge two schools, broadly categorised by geographical origin: the European ‘whodunit’ and the American ‘hard-boiled’. The first produced the amateur detective, and the second, the private eye. Despite following different narrative trajectories, both forms display what Dorothy L. Sayers termed the ‘Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle and end’.<sup>199</sup> Mysteries are solved, though not necessarily with the same degree of comfort. Thus, while the whodunit affirms our sense of an ordered world, the hard-boiled typically ends on a note of dissatisfaction, as the corruption of society is confirmed to the weary protagonist. A notable feature of the Thin Man series is its convergence of whodunit and hard-boiled tropes, and its assumption of audience complicity. These seemingly antipodal traditions are contained within the Nick-Nora couple (respectively, an ex-professional detective and an enthusiastic amateur) and the series’ narrative architecture, which takes in an urban hard-boiled milieu while observing the whodunit conclusion of gathering the suspects and unmasking the culprit.

Julian Symons swiftly notes ‘the convention by which the brilliant detective is made to shine even more brightly through the comparative obtuseness of his

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<sup>199</sup> Symons, Julian, *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 8.

friend’,<sup>200</sup> a pattern popularised in Arthur Conan Doyle’s sixty adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.<sup>201</sup> In a later essay, Symons rather more perceptively notes the way these characters were fleshed out over some forty years. In his first appearances, in the novels *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of the Four* (1890), Holmes was conceived as a mythic hero:

He was deeply egotistical, careless of worldly concerns, a misogynist to the verge of misanthropy. He took little interest in things that concerned the ordinary man, and this alienation was clearly expressed in his drug-taking.<sup>202</sup>

Symons suggests the move to short stories, published every month in *The Strand Magazine*, led Doyle to humanise his character into

a man sometimes brusque but always tender-hearted, irritable upon occasion with his obtuse friend the doctor, but deeply distressed when through him Watson runs into unexpected danger.<sup>203</sup>

Thus, while each story has its own discrete mystery, the friendship between the two characters is the ongoing constant, seen from the point of view of the narrator Watson and configured around the locus of the shared rooms at 221B Baker Street.

In *The Adventure of the Three Garridebs* (one of Conan Doyle’s later stories, published in 1924), Watson is shot by a malefactor and is surprised by the passionate concern of his friend.

‘You’re not hurt, Watson? For God’s sake, say that you are not hurt?’ It was worth a wound - it was worth many wounds - to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation.

‘It’s nothing, Holmes. It’s a mere scratch.’

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>201</sup> Doyle evasively acknowledged his debt to Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘admirable stories of Monsieur Dupin’ by having Holmes dismiss the detective as a bungler. Lellenberg, Jon, Stashower, Daniel, and Foley, Charles (eds.), *Arthur Conan Doyle, A Life in Letters* (London: Harper Collins, 2007), p. 94.

<sup>202</sup> Symons, Julian, *Criminal Practices: Symons on crime writing 60s to 90s* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

He had ripped up my trousers with his pocket-knife.  
'You are right,' he cried, with an immense sigh of relief. 'It is quite superficial.'<sup>204</sup>

The invocation, and then disavowal, of strong homosocial feeling in dangerous circumstances is a convention that the *Thin Man* series transposes onto the heterosexual married couple. Nick and Nora Charles are one of many such variations upon this theme.<sup>205</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest that Dashiell Hammett's decision to converge the two strands of detective fiction in his novel *The Thin Man* (1932) was prompted by his desire to make a statement on the form so far.<sup>206</sup> Hammett's importance to the hard-boiled school led many to criticise this choice.<sup>207</sup> Reviewing the novel in *New Republic*, T. S. Matthews saw it as a stylistic regression:

[Hammett's] murders are gangster-political affairs, they come naturally out of his tough backgrounds, instead of being the academic and farfetched bridge problems in a vacuum of the ordinary detective-story writer. In "The Thin Man", though his New York setting is authentic, and contains some very lifelike policemen, speakeasy proprietors and "rats", the crime and the criminal are in the orthodox tradition.<sup>208</sup>

It is this very conjunction of styles, however, which allows Hammett to question the limits of his chosen literary genre. *The Thin Man* was the first of his novels (it would also be his last) to be published in one of the 'slicks' rather than in a pulp. Various commentators have suggested that the novel represents the author's dissatisfaction

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<sup>204</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan; Klinger, Leslie (ed.), *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes vol. II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), pp. 1598-1599.

<sup>205</sup> The list is always growing, but notable extrapolations from Doyle include Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, even George Bernard Shaw's Henry Higgins and Colonel Pickering. The trend is far less marked in hard-boiled fiction, which prizes the lone protagonist, though a recent example may be found in Walter Moseley's *Easy Rawlins and Mouse*.

<sup>206</sup> Haut, Woody, 'Dashiell Hammett: Under the Sign of Hollywood', *Crime Time* 41 (2004), pp. 3-12.

<sup>207</sup> The atypicality of the novel may explain why *The Thin Man* is excluded from Hammett, Dashiell, *The Four Great Novels* (London: Picador, 1982).

<sup>208</sup> Quoted in Bruccoli, Matthew J. and Layman, Richard (eds.), *Hardboiled Mystery Writers: Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2002), p. 149.



with his career to date.<sup>209</sup> There are autobiographical aspects to Nick Charles,<sup>210</sup> who, like Hammett, is an ex-detective frittering himself away on parties and alcohol.<sup>211</sup>

Peter Wolfe observes that the ‘ending of *Thin Man* [sic.] follows the format of classic mystery fiction’ by ‘bringing the characters together at the end for a demonstration of the evidence and the naming of the culprit’.<sup>212</sup> However, the definitiveness of this classical display is overturned in the following chapter, when Nora complains that the solution seems too ‘loose,’ and Nick responds, ‘When murders are committed by mathematics, [...], you can solve them by mathematics’.<sup>213</sup> The chapter (and the novel, and Hammett’s prose career) ends with Nora’s conclusion that ‘it’s all pretty unsatisfactory’,<sup>214</sup> the whodunit solution compromised by a characteristically hard-boiled denial of comfort.

Tonally, there is nothing approaching this exchange in MGM’s six *Thin Man* films. This is partly a question of generic shift – the films play in a more overtly comedic mode and the protagonists’ marriage is less prickly. However, I wish to argue that Hammett’s implicit consideration of the detective story form is carried over into the films, which additionally contend with the history of the crime film.

## Watching the detectives

Criticism on crime cinema has predominantly addressed those films categorised as *films noir*. There is comparatively little published on Hollywood

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<sup>209</sup> Hammett wrote to his publisher Alfred A. Knopf, ‘I think *The Thin Man* will be my last detective novel: we’ll try our luck with another genre’, and to Lillian Hellman, ‘God willing, [it] will be my last detective novel’. Layman, Richard and Rivett, Julie M. (eds.), *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001) pp. 71, 75.

<sup>210</sup> The parallels were not lost on Hammett, who signed a telegram to Hellman ‘Nicky’. Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>211</sup> Haut argues that the deconstruction of the detective is a running theme in Hammett’s work, writing that he ‘would create protagonists, only to eventually trash them’. Haut, Woody, ‘Dashiell Hammett: Under the Sign of Hollywood’, *Crime Time*, 41 (2004), p. 4.

<sup>212</sup> Wolfe, Peter, *Beams Falling: The Art of Dashiell Hammett* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1980), p. 156.

<sup>213</sup> Hammett, Dashiell, *The Thin Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 184.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

detective films, ongoing series that detailed the adventures of Boston Blackie, The Saint, Charlie Chan and The Lone Wolf, to name but a few.<sup>215</sup> Every studio had its own detective series, which, as Leo A. Handel noted, had the advantage of bypassing ‘the necessity of selling every motion picture independently’.<sup>216</sup> Pertinent to my discussion of the Thin Man series is Handel’s additional observation that in series films ‘it is the basic story type and cast, rather than the name of the producing company, on which promotional campaigns are based’.<sup>217</sup> Thus, the posters that advertised the series balanced visual representations of Nick and Nora’s exuberance with the promise of crime inscribed in the ongoing ‘Thin Man’ tag (a term that becomes entirely connotative after the first film).

In a study of detective masculinities, Phillipa Gates suggests that mystery films of the 1930s and 1940s are typified by their use of ‘transitional detectives’,<sup>218</sup> played by the same star in recurring formulaic narratives. Recalling Handel, Gates writes,

the economic advantage of the “B”-detective film for Hollywood at the time was this possibility of capitalizing again and again on a star’s popularity, as well as that of the character’s, through serialization.<sup>219</sup>

Gates suggests that the stars who played ‘transitional detectives’ are linked by associations of ‘British-ness’ and villainy from their previous roles, concluding that their Anglicised detectives allowed

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<sup>215</sup> It is outside the remit of this study to provide a detailed history of the detective film. For further information see Hardy, Phil (ed.), *The BFI Companion to Crime* (London: Cassell, 1997) and Everson, William K., *The Detective in Film* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1972).

<sup>216</sup> Handel, Leo A., *Hollywood Looks at its Audience, A report of film audience research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), p. 75.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Gates, Phillipa, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 66-81.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p. 72. I find Gates’ use of the word ‘serialisation’ problematically vague. I understand the word to refer to continuous narratives broken up into regular instalments, see Hardy, Phil (ed.), *The BFI Companion to Crime*, pp. 298-299. The films to which Gates refers are discrete narratives that form a larger corpus sharing the same characters. Throughout this study, I refer to the Thin Man sequence as a ‘series’.

an indulgence in, and identification with, a type of masculinity that embodied suavity and culture, lived a lavish lifestyle, and bent the law without “tarnishing” American values or conceptions of heroic masculinity.<sup>220</sup>

It is true that many of these detectives were typified by their suavity, though it is important to note exceptions, such as Boston Blackie and Charlie Chan. Moreover, I am uneasy about assigning nationality to qualities such as sophistication.<sup>221</sup> With regard to Minnesota-born Warren William, star of the Lone Wolf series, this formulation seems especially inappropriate. In these films, William’s active heterosexuality is emphasised by the presence of his asexual British butler, the comically sibilant Jamison (Eric Blore). While Gates makes an important connection between social class and the crime genre, she fails to address the detail of individual series.

Like Gates, Mark Winokur suggests that Powell’s Nick Charles refers us to ‘the latent Anglophilia of Hollywood’.<sup>222</sup> However, Winokur also draws upon Powell’s early career ‘spent playing foreign villains, revolutionaries, and gangsters’.<sup>223</sup> Charting a process of ethnic repression, Winokur argues that the

transformation of the Powell persona merely refracts the unconsciously engineered transformation from ethnic to non-ethnic through the consciously contrived transformation of character actor status to star and leading man.<sup>224</sup>

He concludes that the Powell persona ‘completely and unproblematically erased the stain of ethnicity, while allowing its trace to remain a subject of discourse in his films’.<sup>225</sup> Winokur argues that the vestigial traces of ethnicity in Powell’s persona

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>221</sup> To my (British) eyes, Powell’s Nick Charles embodies a particularly American urbanity.

<sup>222</sup> Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 181.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

permit a socially hierarchical reading of *The Thin Man*, a claim that I dispute in my reading.

Winokur's focus on ethnicity leads him away from discussing Powell's preceding heroic leading roles at any length. As Lawrence J. Quirk notes, Powell's second sound film *The Canary Murder Case* (Malcolm St. Clair and Frank Tuttle, 1929, Paramount) cast him as dilettante sleuth Philo Vance, moving him away from villainous roles.<sup>226</sup> The talkies were good to Powell and it seems likely that his distinctive voice, clipped yet humorous, was a distinguishing factor in his upgrade to leading man status.<sup>227</sup> In films such as *Jewel Robbery* (William Dieterle, 1932, Warner Bros.), *Lawyer Man* (William Dieterle, 1932, Warner Bros.) and *Private Detective 62* (Michael Curtiz, 1933, Warner Bros.), Powell proved his ability to handle adventure and romance, and was paired in multiple films with actresses of the calibre of Kay Francis and Carole Lombard. In addition, he was recast as Philo Vance three times, in *The Greene Murder Case* (Frank Tuttle, 1929, Paramount), *The Benson Murder Case* (Frank Tuttle, 1930, Paramount) and *The Kennel Murder Case* (Michael Curtiz, 1933, Warner Bros.). Based on hugely popular novels by S. S. Van Dine, the films rid Vance of his more effete characteristics,<sup>228</sup> retaining his blue-blood amateur status but dispensing with Van Dine's 'silly-ass' dialogue. Martin Rubin notes the gloves that Powell wears throughout the series, signifying elegance and detachment,<sup>229</sup> but this detail of costuming is balanced by the warm relationship Vance enjoys with the plodding officers of the law (played by E. H. Calvert, Robert McWade and Eugene Pallette). In all of the films mentioned above, (save for *Jewel*

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<sup>226</sup> Quirk, Lawrence J., *The Complete Films of William Powell* (New York: Citadel Press, 1990), p. 22.

<sup>227</sup> It should be noted, however, that *The Canary Murder Case* began shooting as a silent and accommodated dialogue as the craze for talking pictures swept Hollywood.

<sup>228</sup> The Vance of the novels was frequently insufferably supercilious, leading Ogden Nash to compose the memorable doggerel, 'Philo Vance needs a kick in the pance'. Symons, Julian, *Bloody Murder*, p. 118.

<sup>229</sup> Rubin, Martin, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 185.

*Robbery*, which is set in Vienna) Powell plays a sophisticated American hero, with no hint of ‘ethnicity’.

It is notable that, like the *Thin Man* films, the Philo Vance movies all end with the detective gathering his suspects for a scene of explanation and accusation. However, tonally their treatment is quite different. The Vance films play these concluding scenes utterly straight, making no room for humour or self-consciousness, in keeping with Van Dine’s affiliation with the classical whodunit. Any consideration of the *Thin Man* series must take into account the parodic aspect of Powell’s performance as Nick Charles, a character pitched at an audience who knew him as Philo Vance.

This acknowledgement of Powell’s persona is evident in the eccentric trailer for *The Thin Man*, a skit that involves Powell as Vance encountering Powell as Nick through the wonders of split-screen (Fig. 1). Surreally, Nick steps out of a giant-sized prop of Dashiell Hammett’s novel, as though Powell is springing anew from the source text. ‘I haven’t seen you since *The Kennel Murder Case*,’ says Nick, beginning a patter that name-checks *Manhattan Melodrama* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1934, MGM), the first Powell-Loy movie, and explicitly frames diegesis with extra-textual considerations, such as literary source, star persona and genre convention – Nick concludes by stating he ‘got all the suspects together at a dinner party’. The trailer presents *The Thin Man* as a satirical inflection upon the mystery form, confidently addressing an audience familiar with that form’s conventions.

I am not suggesting that the *Thin Man* series was in thrall to the past (of its stars, of its genres), but rather that it assumes audience knowledge of that past. Indeed, that supposition is evident in the earlier film *Paramount on Parade* (Frank

Tuttle et al., 1930, Paramount), a bizarre revue that includes a sketch entitled



Fig. 1 Philo Vance meets Nick Charles

‘Murder Will Out’, pitting Vance (Powell) against Sherlock Holmes (Clive Brook) and Fu Manchu (Warner Oland). Death is the stuff of laughter; the audience is ready for Nick and Nora.

### Marriage and detection

*Lisa:* Besides, you’re not up on your private eye literature. When they’re in trouble, it’s always their Girl Friday who gets them out of it.

*Jeff:* Is she the girl who saves him from the clutches of the seductive showgirls and the over-passionate daughters of the rich?

*Lisa:* The same.

*Jeff:* He never ends up marrying her, does he? That’s strange...

- Grace Kelly and James Stewart in *Rear Window*

Writing in 1928, just two years before she introduced a romantic interest into her own crime novels, Dorothy L. Sayers decreed ‘the less love in a detective-story,

the better'.<sup>230</sup> Sayers was objecting to damsels in distress who distracted detectives from their work but, in failing to acknowledge the long tradition of both female detectives and female Watsons,<sup>231</sup> Sayers comes close to suggesting that there is no room for femininity in the crime genre.

The objective investigation of crime seems at odds with emotion and mutuality, a generic bias exemplified in Sherlock Holmes' misogyny, and manifest in both the whodunit and the hard-boiled as repression - Symons notes that 'in relation to sex the Golden Age detective story was strikingly inhibited'<sup>232</sup> while Claire Gorrara has described female characters as 'an object of pleasure and as a temptation and a trap for the hard-boiled detective'.<sup>233</sup> It is telling that while Chester Gould's Dick Tracy proposed to fiancée Tess Truehart in his very first comic strip (1931), they didn't tie the knot for another eighteen years, and that 'after they were married Tess withdrew into the background'.<sup>234</sup>

Given this anxiety over the (sexual) role of the female in crime fiction, it is unsurprising that, in a discussion of the subject, T. J. Binyon focuses on the pitfalls of married detectives.<sup>235</sup> Even more resolute is Marty Roth who asserts that 'love and marriage are formally incompatible with detective fiction'.<sup>236</sup> And yet, Nora is not an isolated case. In literature, film, radio and television, there are numerous examples of

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<sup>230</sup> Sayers, Dorothy L., 'The Omnibus of Crime' in Haycraft, Howard (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1947), p. 104.

<sup>231</sup> My chapter title acknowledges the first married detectives, Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, who shared adventures beginning in *The Secret Adversary* (1922), and continuing in *Partners in Crime* (1929), *N or M?* (1941), *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968) and *Postern of Fate* (1973).

<sup>232</sup> Symons, Julian, *Bloody Murder*, p. 108.

<sup>233</sup> Gorrara, Claire, 'Victors and Victims: The Hard-Boiled Detective and Recent Feminist Crime Fiction', Klaus, H. Gustav and Knight, Stephen (eds.), *The Art of Murder: New Essays on Detective Fiction* (Tubingen: Stauffenberg Verlag, 1998), p. 169.

<sup>234</sup> Gould, Chester; Galewitz, Herb (ed.), *The Celebrated Cases of Dick Tracy 1931-1951* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Wellfleet, 1990), p. xiv.

<sup>235</sup> Binyon, T. J., *'Murder Will Out': The Detective in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 68-69.

<sup>236</sup> Roth, Marty, *Foul & Fair Play: Reading Genre in Classic Detective Fiction* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 131

detectives in love, most descended from the Nick and Nora model,<sup>237</sup> in which ‘the woman is the instigator of the male’s awakening from an unexciting life’.<sup>238</sup>

Combining marriage and detection forces an acknowledgement of emotion and mutuality, making explicit the implicit bond between detective and companion, and suggesting more strongly that the relationship between the two protagonists might have a bearing on the mysteries they solve. In the Thin Man films, Nora Charles brings together the seemingly antipodal qualities of romance and detection. As Thomas observes, Nora is the catalyst for the mystery narrative, encouraging her husband to demonstrate his investigative powers. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan’s describe the novel’s Nora as Nick’s ‘feed’,<sup>239</sup> a useful term evoking the straight man role of the Watson figure but also mutual enrichment.<sup>240</sup> In Hammett’s novel and in the MGM series, Nora’s enthusiastic awareness of the constituents of a mystery narrative places her alongside the reader/viewer, and contrasts her to the apathetic Nick.<sup>241</sup>

To depict a happily married couple in fiction is to imply a known and legitimate sexuality. However, to depict that happily married couple solving crimes forces an interaction with the *illegitimate* and the *unknown*. Like Dennis Porter, we

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<sup>237</sup> For a sample of the literature, see Muller, Marcia and Pronzini, Bill (eds.), *Detective Duos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For representative films, see *The Ex-Mrs. Bradford* (Stephen Roberts, 1936, RKO), *There’s Always a Woman* (Alexander Hall, 1938, Columbia), *Fast and Loose* (Edwin L. Marin, 1939, MGM), *Busman’s Honeymoon* (Arthur B. Woods, 1940, MGM) and *A Night to Remember* (Richard Wallace, 1942, Columbia), adapted from Roos, Kelley, *The Frightened Stiff* (Boulder: Rue Morgue Press, 2005).

<sup>238</sup> Thomas, Deborah, *Beyond Genre* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 2000), p. 88.

<sup>239</sup> Craig, Patricia and Cadogan, Mary, *The Lady Investigates: Women detectives and spies in fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 85.

<sup>240</sup> It is notable that, in more recent examples of the detective couple, the act of investigation prompts the break-up of the relationship. I am thinking especially of the alienated Mr. and Mrs. Ames in Clowes, Daniel, *Ice Haven* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005) and of Patrick (Casey Affleck) and Angie (Michelle Monaghan) in *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007, Miramax). The latter emphasises its distance from the Thin Man series by having the couple taunted in a shabby bar about their desire for a martini.

<sup>241</sup> Hammett’s biographer, Diane Johnson, quotes from a female fan letter: ‘The result of three people reading “The Thin Man” has brought on the question: to wit – How old is Nora – or how old was she? We are having much much discussion about WOMEN, all on account of her.’ Johnson, Diane, *The Life of Dashiell Hammett* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 111.



might question whether detective narratives ‘share an affective structure both with erotic and competitive activities [...] in which [the vicarious experience of] aggression is less a substitute than an alternative to sex’.<sup>242</sup> With this in mind, I conclude this section with three observations, each suggesting lines of enquiry.

*Time.* Marriage is a commitment to the future, pre-supposing longevity (‘til death us do part’) and continuousness; detection is an investigation into the past, the cutting short of a life, which ends with the solution of the mystery.

*The public world.* Marriage is a social contract legitimised by public ceremony; detection is a ritualised process that entails identifying and punishing those who have stepped outside of society by breaking the law. It involves an incursion into both known and unknown spaces.

*The private world.* Marriage is a state of intimacy between two people, implying the domestic, the ordinary and the private; detection involves observing other people’s lives, exposing their secrets and abandoning a familiar milieu to probe an extraordinary underworld.

### **Nick, gentleman detective**

*The Thin Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, MGM, 1934) announces its difference as a new kind of detective *film*, an amalgamation, parody and summary of the form in both literature and film up until that point. It is also a story about a marriage, and the film begins with Dorothy (Maureen O’Sullivan) and Tommy (Henry Wadsworth) visiting her eccentric father to get his blessing. This father is the eponymous thin man, inventor Clyde Wynant (Edward Ellis) and his subsequent disappearance makes the

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<sup>242</sup> Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 110-111.

young couple's marriage conditional on the solution of the mystery. The opening scenes will also establish two aspects of the film's style. Visual clues are laid – as when the murderer MacCauley (Porter Hall) is introduced emerging from beneath a black umbrella<sup>243</sup> – and there is an emphasis on the cinematic apparatus' capacity to depict the erotic and investigative gaze, as when the gangster Morelli (Edward Brophy) lasciviously inspects a lingerie catalogue.

While MacCauley is introduced haggling with a cab driver, Nick Charles (William Powell) is defined by his social ease in a hotel bar. The space is delineated in a crane shot that begins under the piano of the house band, so that we can see the tapping feet of the musicians and the legs of the dancing couples, and then moves up, allowing us to see the faces of the dancers swaying together in a crowd. By reminding us of the endeavour that underlies entertainment (dancers cannot glide gracefully without legs to propel them and musicians to accompany them), the camera's movement serves a larger pedagogic function, observing social strata as a way of understanding the film's diegesis. The shot places Nick in relation to this way of seeing: he is standing at the bar, away from the crowd, at the extreme right of the frame.

The camera moves down toward the throng, losing Nick as it descends and re-emphasising his separation from the uniform shuffle of the dancers. A cut places the camera amidst the crowd next to Dorothy and Tommy, struggling through a conversation as they struggle through a dance. Tommy dismisses Dorothy's fears for her father even though she presents him with the evidence of a missed birthday card. Tommy is no detective – and it seems here that we are being shown one way that a couple can be: talking, but not listening, to each other. O'Sullivan and Wadsworth's

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<sup>243</sup> Later, Van Dyke will shoot Porter Hall with the shadow of window slats across his face, suggesting prison bars.

performances highlight the youth of these lovers, and their lack of worldliness. Their callow and divergent response to this crisis also raises the question of their compatibility as a couple.

Passing through the crowd, the camera finds Nick instructing a group of bartenders in the correct way to shake a martini. He uses the metaphor of music, saying, 'The important thing is rhythm,' another way of saying comedy is all about timing. A martini must always be shaken to waltz time, and the act of doing so draws attention to Powell's eccentric physical presence, a tipsy loose-limbed rocking to-and-fro to the music of the band and his own inner rhythm. It is important that Nick is introduced in comically instructional mode, and that his pupils are barmen and waiters whose job requires them to be tolerant of this situation. While Nick has assumed the role of teacher, his insistence on the protocol of being served by the waiter and his savouring of the drink and the moment point us toward the way this *bon viveur* will solve crimes. That such an act strikes us as charming depends greatly on the manner in which Nick talks to his audience. Punctuated by hesitations, Powell's drawl has eccentric rhythms of its own but most important is the ease and familiarity with which Nick speaks to these employees of the club. There is no trace of the disciplinarian, as with MacCauley. The introduction of Nick in the role of a comically ridiculous, and socially fluid, teacher is one way in which the film contrasts its detective and its murderer.

Dorothy reintroduces herself to Nick, and this short conversation acts as the film's casual equivalent of a client presenting her case to the detective. The conversational mode and the way this scene invokes a pick-up between two strangers is significant – Nick's readiness to enter into flirtatious banter is another indication of the film's alliance of the realm of sexual interest with that of the mystery narrative.

Dorothy recounts her childhood fascination with the glamorous sleuth and takes pleasure in Nick's appreciation of her physical maturity, a restatement of the perverse implications of the previous scene with her father. The exchange prompts another fruitful way of viewing Nick, when Dorothy says, 'You used to tell me the most wonderful stories, were they true?' and he replies, 'Probably not' – the detective as potentially unreliable storyteller. At one level, this is merely Nick admitting to a propensity to show off and to exaggerate. However, a classification of the role of the detective as archetype is also being made. Steven Marcus' analysis of Hammett's Continental Op stories is pertinent here, especially with regard to the ways in which the detective responds to, and creates, narrative meaning:

What happens is that the Op almost invariably walks into a situation that has already been elaborately fabricated or framed. And his characteristic response to his sense that he is dealing with a series of deceptions or fictions is – to use the words that he uses himself repeatedly – “to stir things up”...He actively undertakes to deconstruct, decompose, and thus demystify the fictional – and therefore false – reality created by the characters, crooks or not, with whom he is involved. More often than not he tries to substitute his own fictional hypothetical representation for theirs – and this representation may also be “true” or mistaken, or both at once.<sup>244</sup>

One of things that Nick does throughout this film is tell stories, attempting to construct a suitable narrative that fits the facts of the case. However, the manner in which Nick does this is innovative precisely because of his audience of one – the companion to his detective, the 'feed' for his comedy, his romantic sparring partner.

### **Nora and Asta**

Nick's description of Clyde Wynant as 'screwy' prompts the raucous entrance of Nora Charles (Myrna Loy), dragged along past protesting waiters by the dog Asta.

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<sup>244</sup> Marcus, Steven, *Representations: essays on literature and society* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 323-324.

We might take this to be the film's way of characterising Nora as a 'screwball'; however, the chaos and indignity of her arrival are not indicative of her subsequent poise. I wish to reflect briefly on the reasons for introducing Nora with this choreographed fall, keeping in mind what we have seen so far of Nick ('The important thing is rhythm'). The pertinent sequence of shots is as follows:

1. The camera placed behind Nora's left arm, as Asta pulls her forward. We cannot see Nora, only Asta pulling forward on his lead, tail wagging. On the soundtrack we hear Asta panting, Nora vainly calling his name and the protestations of the hotel staff. We hear objects falling to the floor.
2. A wider shot of the hotel lobby from behind Nora's back, as we see now the staff trying to intercept her, and we are able to identify the falling objects as Christmas parcels.
3. The camera is now positioned on the dancefloor, as Nora is pulled forward into the room by Asta. She passes through a doorway framed by parted curtains as the maitre'd says, 'You cannot take the dog in there!' Nora replies, 'I'm not taking him, he's taking me!' Onlookers at tables turn to watch her entrance. She trips and falls face-first amidst more of her parcels.

Nochimson suggests that the moment is predicated on disrupting dominant gender associations of femininity with 'animality and the body', since 'the body that is out of control is that of the masculine Asta, and he is frantically searching for his human alter ego, Nick'.<sup>245</sup> This reading lends the moment a 'subtext of Nick's male bodily instability' and, for Nora, an 'association with maleness that dishevels and

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<sup>245</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry*, p. 102.

buffets her'.<sup>246</sup> Certainly, the dog's actions have some correspondence with how the film wishes us to view Nick and Nora. Andrew Britton suggests that screwball dogs focus the comedy of repression, serving 'to express and to provide an occasion for a kind of childlikeness in the couple'.<sup>247</sup> Describing Cary Grant's play with George the dog in *Bringing Up Baby*, Britton notes a 'discrepancy between the behaviour of the Grant character and a conventional paradigm of masculinity' and continues, 'the fact that the discrepancy also involves an opposition between the liberation of energy and its constraint gives to "playing with the dog" a strong positive connotation'.<sup>248</sup> Reflecting Nick and Nora's comedic investigation, Asta also displays the first example of deductive reasoning in the film. 'He's dragged me into every gin mill on the block,' says Nora. 'Yeah, I had him out this morning,' explains Nick. This, then, is the irresistible force that draws the couple together.

*The Thin Man* differs from Britton's screwball examples in its lack of concern with the repressions of its romantic leads. Thus, while there is an analogous discrepancy between Nora's appearance as a wealthy urban consumer and the indignity of her fall, emphasis is placed not on her humiliation, but upon the reactions of onlookers within this formalised space. These varying responses – the hotel's patrons are amused, while its staff express anxiety – suggest the provocation of Nora's modern femininity. The three-shot sequence discloses Loy's body (voice, then rear view, then front view), while the excessiveness of Nora's entrance, passing through a proscenium, makes an issue of her physicality.

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid. Perhaps this overstates the scene's assertion of Asta's gender?

<sup>247</sup> Britton, Andrew, 'Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire', *CineAction!*, 7 (December 1986), pp. 40-41.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

Cavell claims that remarriage comedies ‘can be said to require the creation of a new woman, or the new creation of a woman’.<sup>249</sup> Is this what is connoted by Nora’s spectacular entrance? Consider Cavell’s description of remarriage comedies as

parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman or a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgement (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other.<sup>250</sup>

I wish to use this terminology to characterise the ‘conversation’ between Nick and Nora. In this I am following the lead of the film, in that Nora’s introduction functions as a “meet cute” for a couple that have already met, providing a memorable on-screen starting point for a relationship that has existed (we later find out) for four years previously. In particular, I wish to suggest that Nora’s unconventional femininity is made conditional upon Nick’s eccentric masculinity.

### **Nick and Nora<sup>251</sup>**

‘Women and children first, boys,’ are her first words to the waiters who pull her to her feet, wryly appropriating, and deflecting, patriarchal concern. ‘Say what is the score?’ asks Nick, making a competition of gender. Such a venture requires them to ironically assume society’s traditionally gendered stereotypes (wanton husband, nagging wife). As their initial exchange takes place, Nick and Nora stand to the foreground, with Tommy peering over their shoulders in the middle and the waiter leaning in from the left. The facial reactions of the onlookers to the conversational play shows us the responses open to these characters, amusement in Tommy’s case

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<sup>249</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 16.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>251</sup> It is telling that, in following the sequence of events of the film, I have not been able to head a section ‘Nora’.

and befuddlement in the waiter's. We, as the audience, are permitted another: delight in our awareness of the couple's dynamic play.

The departure of the younger couple puts the focus of the rest of the scene on Nick and Nora. The physical and verbal aspects of Powell's performance here are important in our reading of the marriage. He seats his wife at a table, taking the social role of courtly patriarch. He orders two martinis from Leo the waiter (Nick is always on first-name terms with waiters), not requesting the drink by name but making strange noises and gestures that Leo correctly interprets. We see that Nick is a habitual drinker, that he is equally happy to act foolishly in front of waiters or his wife, but also, I think, that Nick is enjoying both his performance of tipsiness and his anticipation of Nora's response. Nick sits down, and there is a cut to a side-on view of the couple, with Nora on the left and Nick on the right (Fig. 2). A tall bunch of flowers stands between them, on the table. Glitre writes,

Nick and Nora face each other and the straight-on visual framing offers the couple as symmetrical images, as they mirror each other's movements... The symmetry is completed by Nora's request for five more martinis, to match Nick's consumption. Their verbal and physical conversation epitomises their egalitarian, companionate 'mode of association'.<sup>252</sup>

I would add that the framing also suggests the staging for an intellectual contest (like chess), promising that Nick's verbal felicity (his hesitations, his rhythms) might find their match in his partner. Nick pokes his nose on the flowers (another bit of business for the benefit of Nora) then orders them to be taken away, an ironic dismissal of the romantic nature of flora and a clearing of the playing field for the contest. While these gestures are enacted, their dialogue interrogates the roles of husband and wife through the language of infidelity.

*Nick:* Dorothy? Yes, she's a very nice type.

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<sup>252</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 73.



*Nora:* You got types?

*Nick:* Only you, darling. Lanky brunettes with wicked jaws.

The exchange establishes male sexual interest as being active, without suggesting actual betrayal. Importantly, Nick's interest in other women is presented as a positive aspect of his masculinity.



Fig. 2 The couple's intellectual contest

The course of the conversation changes as Nick spins a yarn about Dorothy being his daughter, from an exotic past when 'I didn't know what I was doing'. The comic explosion of the marriage by an unsuspected offspring invokes a time when sexuality was innocent but not contained by monogamy. Nick claims no responsibility for his past, citing an imaginary family history: 'We're all like that on my father's side.' Nora steers the conversation onto another comedic track by asking, 'Say, how is your father's side?' The move into nonsense allows Nick to quite naturally reply, 'Oh, much better, thank you'. It is a mode of patter derived from

vaudeville double-talk acts via the Marx Brothers, identifying Nick and Nora with transgressive modes of comedy, but also establishing their communication through fun.

In connecting Nick's fluency with how much he has drunk, Nora establishes that 'alcohol functions...as a general lubricant for easier living and more flexible play'.<sup>253</sup> Glitre describes Nora's order for five more martinis as an act of equality.<sup>254</sup> This is so, but only in the sense of playfulness. It is a foolish act, a gag about the absurdity of drinking, emphasised by the daintiness with which Nora marks out five spaces on the table. It is a gesture of joining in, of saying if drink is the friend of comedy, then I will drink. It defines one of the shared spaces of Nick and Nora's marriage, acknowledging their capacity to be agents of humour. It is also, given the contexts established in the detective form, worth noting that Nora's sidekick is, once again, playing catch-up to Nick's expert.

### **Knowing 'lovely people'**

At one level, we might see the narrative of *The Thin Man* as charting Nick and Nora's tour of a public realm. Along the way, they become entangled in a complicated matrix of other couples, observing engagements, marriages and infidelities as well as financial and murderous alliances. One of these couples, Dorothy and Tommy, run into trouble and so Nick and Nora help their romance along to fruition. The successful completion of this good deed allows the older and more seasoned couple to return home with renewed vigour. By assisting a young couple in their search for a similar happiness, Nick and Nora rediscover their shared domain, and can return to the comfort of the private world.

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

This admittedly partial reading invites us to consider the level of Nick and Nora's engagement with sociality. Rubin has suggested that a defining feature of the classical detective story is 'the *detachment* of the detective hero'.<sup>255</sup> He makes a spatial metaphor, observing that the 'whodunit detective's involvement is primarily cerebral: figuring out the clues, with little risk, from the perspective of an observer on the sidelines'.<sup>256</sup> However, the companion character frequently acts as an emotional conduit between the detective's intellectual interest and the client's personal interest in the case (most clearly demonstrated in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*, which concludes with Dr. Watson marrying Mary Morstan). In *The Thin Man*, Nora displays emotional involvement, as when she tells Nick, of Dorothy, 'That girl's in a tough spot'. To some extent, this is permitted by the fact of Nick and Nora's emotional mutuality, though it is not necessarily gender related: Watson can become just as entangled as Nora.

The Christmas Eve party scene shows us the two modes of Nick and Nora's social interaction. The most sustained conversation takes place between the couple and Face Peppler (Huey White), a crook who Nick once sent 'up the river' to Sing Sing. This exchange is full of mutual good grace, a kind of kidding professional affection rooted in an exclusively masculine past life and Nora is keen to ask, 'Was he a good detective?' The presence of disparate social groups brings together the variant strata of society that Nick and Nora will encounter, providing a spectacle of the collision of these Hollywood 'types'. Speaking of Nora, one drunken plug-ugly declares he 't'inks she's great!' 'I wanted you to see her,' replies Nick, and as an aside, 'and I wanted her to see *you*.'

Winokur writes,

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<sup>255</sup> Rubin, Martin, *Thrillers*, p. 185.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

In its editing, *The Thin Man* tries to maintain a physical distinction between the wealthy and the poor, criminal, or ethnic, separating them in different sequences, different spaces. At a party thrown by the Charleses, Nick is at pains to sequester his “tonier” guests in private rooms. But even this segregationist impulse is contradicted by the tendency, when wealthy and poor must inhabit the same frame, to crowd them together for the sake of humour. And in contrast to the attempt to heirarchichalize the classes, other values are obfuscated in such a way that several positive values accrue to the criminal. Criminals and cops, for example, tend to be more trustworthy than the wealthy, to know more, and to be less narcissistic. More important, they are comically eccentric.<sup>257</sup>

Winokur fails to mention the circular camera movement that has Nick moving through the crowd, topping up drinks. His account of class segregation is also somewhat misleading. Both Nick and Nora talk privately to Dorothy and her mother Mimi (Minna Gombell) away from the action of the party about the murder of Julia Wolf and the disappearance of Wynant. Neither are ‘guests’; rather, they are attempting to respectively involve and dissuade Nick from investigating the case. The scenes allow Nick (detective) to dispassionately question Dorothy and for Nora (sidekick) to gallantly stand up to Mimi’s bullying of Dorothy. As Winokur implies, the film shifts tonal register with their arrival but, by carrying over Nick and Nora’s comic eccentricity, these scenes ensure a continuity between the fun of the party and the drama of the investigation. If anything, it is the ‘tonier’ guests who seem out of place.

Dorothy produces a gun, claiming that she killed her father’s mistress in a kind of jealous rage. Nick wrestles it from her and then, by comparing her story with the evidence, he dismisses it as spurious. He comforts her with an embrace, just as Nora enters the room. The camera pans across from her to her husband. Dorothy’s face is buried in Nick’s shoulder as he mimes a long face for Nora (stretching his features out), the camera pans back as she responds with a wrinkled nose of mock annoyance

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<sup>257</sup> Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter*, p. 190.

(squeezing her features together). Glitre cites the moment as an example of how Nora breaks from ‘supposedly essential feminine traits’ (in this case, jealousy) and as a demonstration of the Charles’ reciprocal companionate relationship.<sup>258</sup> Nochimson similarly observes that the scene ‘makes a joke of that capriciously drawn line that establishes the socially contracted exclusive couple relationship’.<sup>259</sup> It is more than this, though. The horizontal plane across which the camera moves left, then right, mimics their private exchange of funny faces, delineating their emotional connection, and linking our experience with their shared subjectivity, which can move between the shifting narrative modes of drama and comedy.

Contrary to Rubin’s formulation, this detective and companion exist in a state of tension between detachment and involvement. Nora sighs, ‘Oh Nicky, I love you because you know such lovely people’, the declaration of intimate feeling (made in a two-shot of the couple) a corollary of involvement in the social world (represented by the guests at the party). Let us modify Winokur’s observations regarding editing: in this case, the cut from party guests to couple does not distinguish between class spaces, but rather between Nick and Nora and the objects of their perception, who encompass all classes.

This creation of a shared space amidst the public recalls Glitre’s description of such instances of mutual regard as ‘happy moments [which] do not advance the story, but function as a form of spectacle, arresting – even supplanting the causal chain of events’.<sup>260</sup> The ‘spectacle’ that the protagonists enact here consists of their reaction to, and interaction with, the denizens and spaces of the social world. The subsequent shot of the party visualises the couple’s shared perception; the cut to the two-shot introduces the second level of spectacle – the reaction of the couple and Nora’s ironic

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<sup>258</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 85.

<sup>259</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry*, p. 108.

<sup>260</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 84.

appraisal of love and these lovely people. At the end of the party scene, they are an audience to the spectacle of their guests.

### **Bedside manners**

The following bedroom scene plays upon various forms of appetite (sexual, cultural, and alcoholic), depicting the intimate setting disrupted by the action of the mystery narrative, with the intrusion of Morelli. Nora's desires are aligned with the audience's expectations of how a detective *should* behave: crucially, Nick defines himself by his disinterest in anything but the pursuit of leisure.

The couple's exchange is about gratification and denial of desire, illustrated physically by Nora refusing a drink, waiting for Nick to fix himself one and return to bed, then changing her mind. The setting of the hotel bedroom strengthens the sexual double entendres of the conversation, as does the glamorous costuming of Loy. In a fur-trimmed low-cut nightgown, she reclines back on her pillow, hands behind her head – the display of sexual allure simultaneously cosy through the tacit acknowledgement of Production Code requirements. Dennis Porter, theorising the connection between pleasure and the detective story, writes

The goal in our pursuit of pleasure is often not sex but excitement by another means. In the opposition between Eros and Thanatos, for example, the tendency to privilege the former in psychoanalytic criticism is overwhelming. Yet the popularity of the detective story suggests not that the latter is in some sense a substitute for the former, its perverted equivalent, but that both impulses are physiologically unified. Thus a detective novel may excite on the level of manifest content of violence without any necessary allusion to a latent sexual signified.<sup>261</sup>

When Nick offers to buy Nora 'a whole lot of detective stories' as an alternative to actual crime solving, his exaggerated disinterest (in detection, in his

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<sup>261</sup> Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime*, p. 111.

wife's desire) signals the narrative import of both. To borrow Porter's Freudian terminology, Thanatos (the drive toward risk) may be interpreted here not just as the danger inherent in the mystery narrative but also the disruption of the settled order of marriage. The inseparability of the two in this movie is aptly illustrated when Nora asks for her Christmas present but Nick demurs until breakfast, a joke about gratification and inference.

*Nora:* What are you going to give me? I hope I don't like it.

*Nick:* Well, you'll have to keep them anyway, because the man at the aquarium said he wouldn't take them back.

I have argued that Nick and Nora's interaction with other characters is based around the process of observation. The entrance of Morelli brandishing a pistol enacts this dynamic through physical violence. The scene forces Nick and Nora into the roles of detective and companion, establishing his casual toughness and her cool head. Nick calmly requests that Morelli lower his gun, stating, 'my wife doesn't mind but I'm a very timid fellow' and Nora calls her husband an idiot. The pretence of timidity, which reverses gender stereotype, is a declaration of courage, but Nora's comment also exposes its bluster.

When the police arrive at the door, Morelli panics. Nick punches Nora to knock her out of the line of fire, rendering her unconscious, and wrestles the gun from Morelli, taking a shot in the side as he does so. This sudden rush of action literally changes the pace of the scene, the speed of the film quickening to exaggerate the fluidity of Nick's violent action. This effect foregrounds the violence done to Nora, while the tussle with Morelli moves back away from the camera. Her reaction upon coming round is instructive. 'You darn fool,' she cries, 'I knew you'd take him, but I wanted to see you do it!'

The parallels with Watson's wounding in *The Adventure of the Three Garridebs* are marked as Nick takes his wife in his arms.<sup>262</sup> As in the Conan Doyle, concern is accompanied by the expression of its absence. A crucial difference, however, lies in the way that Watson's narration fixes our point of view. Here, the audience has seen what Nora has not.

### **The democratic couple**

What is at stake in the marriage of Nick and Nora? Writing about Katharine Hepburn's films with Spencer Tracy, Andrew Britton argues,

The theme of the 'democratic' couple, [...] is the creation of a heterosexual relationship based on the social/sexual/professional 'equality' of the partners.<sup>263</sup>

Listing 'variants of this type',<sup>264</sup> Britton briefly mentions Powell and Loy, then goes on to more fully examine Hepburn and Cary Grant and Bogart and Bacall: 'two bodies of work in which the bourgeois understanding of 'democratic' sexuality is placed under much greater strain'.<sup>265</sup> I wish to use Britton's terminology to interrogate this question of 'equality', ultimately questioning the place Nick and Nora occupy in society.

At this point in the film, the couple's status has been defined by the privacy of their mutual dialogue, and their detachment and engagement with the social world of leisure. In their first scene together, this dialogue was visually expressed as an intellectual contest in which individual victories are superseded by the flow of ideas, and the responsive pleasure in the other's wit. The continuous exchange functions as

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<sup>262</sup> Watson does not see Holmes 'take' the villain either.

<sup>263</sup> Britton, Andrew, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist* (London: Studio Vista, 1995), p. 179.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 180.



a metaphor for mutual stimulation, just as Nora's insistence that Nick take on the Wynant case raises the question of fulfilment.

Cavell observes that in remarriage comedies the discussion of marriage is a luxurious state, permitted by the possession of wealth.<sup>266</sup> He suggests that 'economic issues in these films, with all their ambivalence and irresolution, are invariably tropes for spiritual issues'.<sup>267</sup> What, then, might we discern from the displays of extravagant consumption that Nick and Nora indulge in? The film does not seek to chastise them for their profligacy: on the contrary, we are invited to revel in their freedoms. The source of their wealth, and its casual description by Nick, is instructive: Nora's father has died, leaving them 'a narrow-gauge railway, a lumber mill and several other things', industries upon which the construction and expansion of American civilisation depends. The couple's lack of involvement in this world is emphasised by Nick's recurring jokes about leaving employment through marrying into wealth, thus becoming a 'gentleman'. At one point he explains his apathy toward the Wynant case by telling Nora that he is too busy making sure she doesn't lose any of the money he married her for. Criminal investigation is thus a re-entry into employment - a re-employment of his time, in which financial gain is not the motive. By taking on the case, he re-engages with purpose, which is not configured as socially valuable (though the capture of a murderer certainly is) but personal - smoothing the way for Dorothy and Tommy's union, and fulfilling his wife's desire.

The decision to take on the case is implicitly an assumption of adulthood.

Cavell notes the tendency of 'remarriage comedies' to

allow the principal pair to express the wish to be children again, or perhaps to be children together. In part this is a wish to make room for playfulness within the gravity of adulthood, in part it is a wish to be

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<sup>266</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 5.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

cared for first, and unconditionally (e.g., without sexual demands, though doubtless not without sexual favours). If it could be managed, it would turn the tables on time, making marriage the arena and discovery of innocence.<sup>268</sup>

The absence of schism in Nick and Nora's relationship means that *The Thin Man* has an inverse project to the 'remarriage comedies'. The couple *are* able to be children together. What is at stake is their ability to be adults together without losing the quality of innocence that binds them.

The scene on Christmas morning illustrates this. Nora is wearing her presents from Nick, a fur coat and a watch. The wounded Nick is reclining on the sofa playing with his present from Nora, a toy popgun. The disparity in expense and intention of the gifts casts Nora as tolerant parent watching as her husband romps on the sofa, taking pot-shots at the Christmas tree, until he inevitably shatters a window. He curls up foetally, miming awakening and incomprehension ('Where am I?'). The extremity of Nick's Oedipal performance immediately precedes his decision to take on the case, signalled by the process of naming: Nick is 'Sherlock', Nora 'Dr. Watson'. Crucially, the assumption of adulthood must not compromise child-like play. Nick's pop-gun shatters the seal of their hermetic chambers, prompting an engagement with the outside world<sup>269</sup> but also characterising its manner, echoing but appropriating the gunshot of the previous night. Like children, the couple skip away arm in arm.

By reclaiming his status as detective, Nick accesses a realm of experience closed off from Nora. Sherlock is, by definition, expert in a way that Watson is not. However, gender is at issue here in a way that is absent in my analogy. Basinger criticises Nick's patriarchal exclusion of Nora from excursion into the criminal worlds of the Thin Man series, suggesting that the 'plots often turn on how he has to get away

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<sup>268</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 60.

<sup>269</sup> Their subsequent walk along the street with Detective Guild (Nat Pendleton), filmed in natural light on the studio back lot and accompanied by birdsong, depicts this emergence.

from her to conduct his sleuthing business'.<sup>270</sup> Is, then, Nick's entitlement of adulthood conditional upon Nora's lack of autonomy? Part of the comedy of these scenes (in the first film, Nick packs Nora into a taxi, sending her to Grant's tomb, leaving Guild and himself to investigate) resides in their sadism, as though Nick is punishing Nora's enthusiasm and desire. However, Nora's frustration is not, as Basinger implies, elided. Sending her away strengthens her resolve to be a part of the investigation, to find her place in this part of her husband's life.

Guild takes Nick to the shabby apartment of informant Nunnheim (Harold Huber). The deprivation of the surroundings is emotional as well as physical, the cramped nature of the flat<sup>271</sup> dramatising the frustrations of cohabitation. Learning of Nunnheim's infidelities, his girlfriend Marion (Gertrude Short) bombards him with pots and pans, exiting with a delicious parting shot.

*Marion:* I don't like crooks. And if I did like 'em, I wouldn't like crooks that are stool pigeons. And if I did like crooks that are stool pigeons, I still wouldn't like you!

Nunnheim's appeal to a homosocial level of knowledge ('you know how it is, fellas') contrasts him with Nick. Nunnheim and Marion are adults who share living space, but have no emotional common ground. Nunnheim's time away from her has been spent in corrupt activity. We are reminded of the crucial element of trust in Nick and Nora's relationship.

Nora is able to conduct independent criminal enquiries, but she is restricted to her own social milieu. Later, observing Dorothy reject Tommy's proposal, Nora comments, 'Sleuthing isn't much fun' – the closest the film will get to the 'unsatisfactory' moment that concludes the source novel. In the next room, Dorothy rejects marriage and declares herself to be 'out for the ride', while her odd brother

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<sup>270</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman's View*, p. 320.

<sup>271</sup> A room that is both kitchen and living area – Nick and Nora simply have food sent up to their hotel rooms.

Gilbert (William Henry) makes a fatuous analogy between children and Mendel's experiments with sweetpeas. The absent father (Wynant) precipitates the breakdown not just of the family, but of the future marriage.

**'I'm glad you're not a detective!'**

On finding Wynant's skeleton, Nick uses a fluoroscope to identify it. In the following scenes, Nora's joking about once being 'a gleam in her father's eye' and Nick's quipping that 'skeletons all look alike...I looked for it and I found it' connect vision with the forthcoming spectacle of the finale.

The conclusions of detective narratives generate surprise through a reformulation of past events and the revelatory exposure of the murderer. Discussing literary examples, John G. Cawelti conceptualises this pleasure as 'seeing clear and meaningful order emerge out of what seemed to be random and chaotic events'.<sup>272</sup> Were we to judge the dinner party scene that concludes *The Thin Man* on these criteria, we might find it lacking. A solution is proffered, though it fails to impose order. This denial of satisfaction is its achievement, reformulating the purpose of this revelatory scene.

We are directed to observe the dramaturgical aspects of this scene. As Nick and Nora set place cards at their dinner table, they are blocking the forthcoming scene. Suspects are placed next to each other for dramatic effect, though neither Nora ('I can't stand the suspense. Which one of them did it? I wish you'd tell me.') nor Nick ('I wish you'd tell *me!*') know how the scene will end. The antinomy of appearance/intent, the exposure of the murderer, is represented as *soirée*/interrogation,

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<sup>272</sup> Cawelti, John G., *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 89.

manifest in the policemen disguised as waiters, bowing *too* low and mangling French with Brooklyn accents ('Yes, m'sewer!').

The scene also emphasises the virtuoso nature of the detective's summary.<sup>273</sup> Mimi complains she has been dragged away from an engagement at the theatre, but Nora replies 'Nicky's putting on a little show of his own'. The members of his audience are all (save for Nora and Guild) legitimate suspects through their connections to either Wynant or Julia Wolf, though Nick's seeming complicity with MacCauley misdirects our attention.<sup>274</sup> We are at once spectators of Nick's performance but also, through successive close-ups of the suspects, invited to play detective by judging their responses to his accusations. Police officers stand at the sidelines like crew on a film set. The association of mystery narrative tropes with the cinematic apparatus even permits an orchestra to be present, providing a diegetic overture to Nick's star turn.

The dinner sequence has two narrative problems to resolve: not only the murder mystery and its attendant implications for Nick and Nora, but also the schism created between Dorothy and Tommy by the absence of Wynant. Tommy has arrived on his own, while Dorothy has become associated with the predatory Quinn (Clay Clement), a man of dishonourable intentions. 'I was just about to take my first false step,' Dorothy proclaims, a statement that threatens her claim to, and control of, legitimate sexuality. Tommy fumes at this cavalier snub at his marriage plans and threatens to 'take a poke' at Quinn. Nick places Tommy at the table as 'in-man', predicated this narrative climax upon a competitive masculinity that places Dorothy as damsel in distress, reclaimable through patriarchal action. Interestingly, it is Nora

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<sup>273</sup> In her autobiography, Loy recalls that 'Poor Bill complained loudly that he had to learn so many lines while I just gave him those knowing Nora Charles looks every now and then'. Kotsilibas-Davis, James and Loy, Myrna, *Myrna Loy: Being and Becoming* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 89.

<sup>274</sup> The film has not given us the means to discount or favour certain suspects. I will discuss the series' use of suspects in my discussion of *After the Thin Man*.

who allows this to happen, distracting Quinn as Tommy comforts Dorothy. When Quinn protests, Tommy knocks him down, the prone body falling to the left of the frame. Nick aloofly instructs a waiter, 'kindly remove that', preparing us for the way the murderer will be dismissed as a function of the plot.

The solution of the mystery hinges upon the bourgeois connections between marriage and property. Nick reveals that Wynant is dead, challenging Mimi to describe Wynant's clothes at their last meeting, and catching her in a lie as she conjures a spurious physical description. Gilbert contradicts her account, describing a vision that came to him in his crystal ball, a perverse inversion of the fluoroscope. The scene states the importance of knowing what one has seen, as Guild realises that that the skeleton of last night was Wynant's.

Understanding that her second marriage is bigamous, and that she is therefore the beneficiary of Wynant's estate, Mimi reveals MacCauley as the murderer. Nick's repeated reference to the murderer as 'our hero' in his summary prompts a conventional act of villainy. A shot under the table shows the as-yet-unnamed murderer producing a gun to silence Mimi. Nick now 'takes' MacCauley (a suggestive phrase that again evokes the cinematic apparatus), mirroring Tommy's previous action by swiftly knocking MacCauley away to the right of frame.

The onlookers' variant responses to this narrative climax illustrate the film's two generic modes. Dorothy reacts with disbelief and horror, looking down at MacCauley's prone body (like Quinn, he has been reduced to an unnecessary narrative article, and we do not see the object of her gaze). Morelli, on the other hand, is comically relieved. 'Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!' he announces, smiling into the camera. Breaking the fourth wall, this unique shot contradicts Winokur's assertion

that the film does not permit 'conscious identification with the character actors'.<sup>275</sup>

Morelli's comment out to the cinematic audience invites a shared response to the narrative surprise. It answers the previous close-ups around the dinner table, allowing the suspect to look back at the audience, acknowledging the way in which spectacle and narrative have been configured around vision.

In foregrounding the spectacle of mystery, *The Thin Man* displays an awareness of itself as a product of popular genre. 'What do you want me to do,' Nick asks Guild, as they look down at the unconscious MacCauley, 'wrap him up in cellophane?' Finally permitted the visual gratification she has desired, Nora is horrified. 'Nicky, he might have killed you!' she exclaims, 'I'm glad you're not a detective!' Understandably, given his stellar performance, Nick reacts with mock outrage.

The final scene of the film takes place on a sleeper train back to California, as Nick and Nora toast the newly married Dorothy and Tommy. Their tipsy dialogue – 'Here's to you two!' 'And to you two too!' – and the fact that they are all dressed in pyjamas might seem to suggest an affinity between the two married couples. In actuality, the scene presents their difference, or rather Nick and Nora's exceptional nature. As Nick and Nora leave Dorothy and Tommy to their festive marital bed, the film points us toward two kinds of Shakespearean ending. Jovially, Nick quotes, 'And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest',<sup>276</sup> a ribald connection between the loss of virginity and death but also of narrative closure signalled through a famous epitaph. At the same time, Nick's drunken disquisition on the correct time zone conjures comedy, not tragedy, recalling Theseus' final speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve:

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<sup>275</sup> Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter*, p. 191.

<sup>276</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 202.

Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time.<sup>277</sup>

The acceptance, in these final moments of the film, of melodrama and comedy indicates the film's equal interest in each mode. Death can inflect the discussion of sex – and both can be a laughing matter.

Another repetition between the two couples asserts their difference. 'I thought they'd never leave!' says the ardent Tommy, sweeping Dorothy up into his arms. In the adjoining compartment, Nora tuts, 'I thought you'd never leave!' as Nick witters on about time zones. There is a gesture here towards what Young terms the 'assertion of knowing the other so well and of being so well known that the conversation brings an end in order that it begin again, so that the marriage can perennially recur'.<sup>278</sup> But there is also a definite ending, as Nora tells Nick that he'll be sleeping in the top bunk, which he counters with a daring, 'Oh yeah?', swinging Asta up into his berth and stooping to kiss his wife. The final shots show us Asta covering his eyes with a paw and an exterior of the cabin lights winking out. Both images acknowledge the limits within which sexual activity can be depicted. Neatly turning the film's interest in vision on its head, the ending points us toward something we cannot see, but which we *know*, nevertheless: the health and happiness of Nick and Nora's sexual life.

### **What happens *After the Thin Man*?**

A certain critic – for such men, I regret to say, do exist – made the nasty remark about my last novel that it contained "all the old Wodehouse characters under different names." He has probably now been eaten by bears, like the children who made mock of the prophet Elisha: but if he still survives he will not be able to make a similar charge against *Summer Lightning*. With my superior intelligence, I have outgeneralled the man this time by putting in all the old Wodehouse characters under the same names. Pretty silly it will make him feel, I rather fancy.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Shakespeare, William, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 119.

<sup>278</sup> Young, Kay, *Ordinary Pleasures*, p. 84.

<sup>279</sup> Wodehouse, P. G., *Weekend Wodehouse* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 290.



Previous commentators on the Thin Man series have tended to restrict their attention to the first film, discussing the sequels only in terms of compromise and banal mimesis. James Harvey notes ‘a process that continues by degrees through each of the subsequent films in the series: the taming and safe domesticating of Nick and Nora’.<sup>280</sup> Mark Winokur observes a neutralisation of eccentricity and agency in the Powell and Loy personas respectively.<sup>281</sup> Kathrina Glitre sees the onset of domestication as suggesting ‘changing cultural attitudes and priorities, but also the hegemonic assimilation of companionate marriage’.<sup>282</sup> In each case, the focus is on the ways in which the depiction of the couple fails to replicate the pattern of the first film. The remainder of this chapter considers successive sequels in relation to the ongoing series. It is my contention that the five sequels have the wit to acknowledge the difficulties of extending the story of Nick and Nora, and that this is related to issues surrounding the detective story as a genre, the series format and the demands of depicting a continuous marriage.

In this chapter, I discuss the second and third Thin Man films, deferring consideration of the last three for my next chapter. This seems a natural division, especially given the way the series introduces ideas of the family. To begin with, then, I wish to define my understanding of how these films constitute ‘a series’. In the six films that have William Powell and Myrna Loy playing Nick and Nora Charles, a linear chronology is observed. Each film is presented as following its predecessor temporally in a shared diegetic world. However, such a conception is inherently problematic. A coherent diegesis that spanned six movies made between 1934-1947 would have to accommodate the effects of changes in production crews, and in modes of production. The visual evidence of the films consistently betrays this

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<sup>280</sup> Harvey, James, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, p. 176.

<sup>281</sup> Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter*, pp. 229-230.

<sup>282</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 86.

project. Spaces in time between productions do not correspond with those elapsed between narratives – this is most clearly seen in the incongruous physical aging of Powell and Loy. Logical inconsistencies (such as the recurrence of actors playing different parts, cf. Edward Brophy in the first and fifth films) disrupt the sense of a continuous world. In narrative terms, also, repetitions of situation and dialogue in successive movies strain diegetic credibility.

In what sense, then, is this ‘a series’? One way of answering this might be to pick up my last point about the films’ consistent interest in certain kinds of patterns of behaviour and speech. Let us take the common situation of Nick being greeted by an amiable criminal from the past, who is introduced to Nora as being somebody Nick ‘sent up the river’. Variations on the scene occur in each film. While each iteration shares basic tenets, each successive film invites the audience to recognise the way in which it reformulates the display of Nick’s friendship with the criminal, the comic invocation of their shared past, Nick’s display of this to Nora, and Nora’s response. It is not enough to make the obvious point about expectation and variation – the way in which the scenes are offered to us make them seem like little rewards. This is evident in the pleasurable sense of escalation we get from things like the naming of the criminals: ‘Face’, ‘Fingers’, ‘Creeps’, ‘Meatballs’, etc.

A concern with the terms of the sequel can be seen in the opening of *After the Thin Man*. The title of the film draws attention to the issue of subsequence, positioning it in relation to its predecessor and signalling the way in which the sequel’s narrative will pick up where the first left off (with the train journey from New York to San Francisco). In an article from 1937, W. S. Van Dyke describes the production’s aims of replication and reconstruction, drawing attention to the compression of time:

Here, at least, was to be something new in film fare – two distinctly separate motion picture mysteries, linked together with the same major characters and with less than a week's time elapsing between the finale of the first and the beginning of the other. Yet, three years had swept away between the shooting of the last scene for *The Thin Man* and the first scene for *After the Thin Man*.<sup>283</sup>

The film opens with a shot of the back of the train, and a sleeping conductor with his feet up. The name of the train is prominent – the ‘Sunset Limited’, a combination of words which manage to evoke the traditional visual image for the ending of the film (riding into the sunset) and the liberating qualities of the sequel (the sense that a narrative that we previously assumed to have ended can be picked up again, a confounding of our expectations regarding formal limitations). In San Francisco, we see stock footage of crowds of people in the train station watching the arrivals board, upon which a hand scrawls ‘Sunset Limited – On Time’. Clearly, the film is having fun with its audience here, acknowledging the three years that the public have had to wait for a sequel (connecting the arrival of the train and the delivery of a sequel) but also, through the statement of punctuality, disregarding it in the world of the film.<sup>284</sup>

On the train, we see the couple making preparations to disembark, Nick shaving and Nora packing away their things. There is some business concerning the inadequacy of the tiny cabin, with the awkward placing of the bathroom door nearly causing Nick to slice his own throat with his razor, neatly restating the first film's conjunction of the domestic and the deadly. I understand this emphasis on cramped physical space to be *After the Thin Man*'s way of drawing attention to the replication of a set from *The Thin Man*. In that first film, the view we had of the cabin showed us

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<sup>283</sup> Koszarski, Richard, *Hollywood Directors 1914-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 314-315.

<sup>284</sup> Schatz notes Irving Thalberg's influence on the staggering of MGM's film series: ‘Thalberg convinced him [Louis B. Mayer] to limit production to one Tarzan movie every two years, hoping to keep the premise fresh and to maximize profits. [...] So by 1935 Metro was developing a three-tiered production system, with Thalberg, [David O.] Selznick, and [Hunt] Stromberg handling the prestige output, the second-string producers supervising more routine fare, and [Lucien] Hubbard cranking out relatively inexpensive products’. Schatz, Thomas, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Film-making in the Studio Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 170-171.

a door on the left hand side of the frame and two bunk beds at the back of the set. Here, the initial shots (the first and the third) give us the opposite view, self-consciously placing the camera where the wall behind the bunks would be. As well as this, the second shot of the scene has shown us a previously unsuspected bathroom. This is the first example of a key gambit of this sequel, in which elements of its predecessor are repeated, rephrased or reversed, in an attempt to reorient the audience in a diegesis across two films.

Beginning the scene with Nick's close shave alerts us to the scene's expression of concerns carried over from the first film into the series. One of these is the examination of social roles, and the way in which Nick and Nora's playfulness questions what it means to be both a married couple and detectives. Nick coyly hands Nora a negligee, and she complains, 'How they can expect a woman to still have any mystery for a man after living in a place like this for three days, I don't know!' On the one hand, this is a comment on privacy and the placing of the self within the couple. Their enactment of traditional gender roles (he shaving, she packing) strengthens this sense. On the other hand, the punning on the word 'mystery' equates Nora's sexual allure with the prospect of criminal investigation, impressing upon us the fact that the couple are not confined to the enactment of husband-and-wife. Nick is able to articulate these roles of spouse and detective in relation to his ego, when he comically asserts his self as 'something much better, something more alluring' than Nora's 'mystery'.

That these privately defined roles are open to reinterpretation by others is evident as the train slows down on reaching the station. Nick and Nora kiss, and a view through the window shows us a railway engineer running alongside the carriage, wagging his finger at them in mock chastisement. 'It's alright, we're married,' Nora

assures him (and the audience), an insistence that their assignation is legitimate, however illegitimate the setting might make it seem. A more pronounced shift in register from the private to the public occurs once Nick and Nora disembark. A flock of reporters descend upon them, eagerly asking about their roles as detectives, and setting up what could be seen as a meta-textual enquiry. The mix of familiarity and enthusiasm with which the reporters greet Nick and Nora recalls the press's mode of communication with movie stars. 'Oh, that Thin Man case was a beaut! Pick up another Thin Man for us, won't you, Nick?' demand the newspapermen. Their questions explicitly posit the issue of a diegetic world shared between this film and its predecessor. The alliance of the reporters' position with that of the cinematic audience (in their enthusiastic recollection of the first investigation/film, and in their anticipation for the events of a second) foregrounds the concept of shared memory, a basis upon which to build a series.

It becomes clear that one of the ways that *After the Thin Man* will express its interest in notions of a shared past is through introducing us to a branch of Nora's family. This also permits the film to demonstrate the differences between spaces of modern money and traditional money. Nick and Nora are summoned by the formidable and aristocratic Aunt Katharine (Jessie Ralph) to her townhouse, an ossified space occupied by a comically decrepit butler and a gaggle of elderly relatives. Nick's presence is an unfortunate necessity. Whilst Nora's family deplore his lack of social standing ('Poor Nora is so brave,' says one of the aunts), his skills as a detective are required to discreetly solve a family problem. Nora's cousin Selma (Elissa Landi) is at her wit's end because her no-account husband Robert (Alan Marshall) will not return home. Standing on the sidelines is David (James Stewart), who we learn has always loved Selma and who, in offering comfort to her, is

presented as a desirable alternative to her bad marriage. Significantly, both Robert and David are defined through a monetary relationship with Selma. Robert has married Selma for her wealth. Meanwhile David (falsely, as it turns out) claims he is weighing up an offer to bribe Robert \$25,000 to disappear and leave the way clear for him. Caught in the middle is the infantilised and frequently hysterical Selma, under the supervision of her mother and the sinister Dr. Kammer (George Zucco). A major thread of the plot will depend upon her mental instability and her inability to recall whether or not she is a murderer.

We are invited to draw comparisons between Nick and Nora and the David-Selma-Robert triangle. Nora suggests that David and Selma make a foursome with them to see in the New Year. 'It'll be like old times, when we were all engaged!' she says. 'Yes, before we made any mistakes,' Nick deadpans. This association of 'old times' with regret insistently raises the possibility of variant perception, that one half of a couple might privately remember their mutual past differently. In the case of Nick and Nora, this comes in the form of a joke that nevertheless presages the revelation of David as the murderer at the end of the film, bitterly resentful of his past rejection.

The film never really makes it clear why Selma should have chosen Robert over David. This lack of interest in a crucial decision points us to one of the film's narrative concerns: namely, what can happen to marriages over the course of time. We may read this as well as the film commenting upon its own status as a sequel, and the necessity to further depict the marriage of Nick and Nora. It is not only the lack of a courtship story that makes us compare Robert-Selma and Nick-Nora. Robert is configured as a dissipated double of Nick, one whose vices cannot be treated humorously. He is a drunk who leeches money from his wife to fund his infidelity, a

grotesquely inflected manifestation of the innuendo that forms Nick and Nora's comic dialogue. We might also note that the casting of Alan Marshall suggests a physical likeness between Robert and Nick. The film expresses its dialectic between public and domestic space again through this character. While Nick is continually desirous of privacy and rest, Robert has been getting drunk for three days in the Lychee Club, an Orientalised space of female performance which functions as a site of complex and perverse sexual and economic inter-relationships. Robert plans to extort money from his wife and run off with Polly (Dorothy McNulty), a dancer at the Lychee. However, he is unaware that Polly and Dancer (Joseph Calleia), the owner of the club, are using him to get to Selma's money. Meanwhile, Polly's estranged husband Phil (Paul Fix) is attempting to cut himself into the scheme by posing as her brother. The doubling of Robert with Nick reaches its zenith when he is murdered, thus becoming the subject of the detective's investigation.

When the couple do find respite from their investigation of Robert's death, their version of the domestic world is predictably eccentric. Anxious for sleep, Nick puts the telephone receiver in his bedside drawer. However, Nora keeps pestering him, at one point asking if he has any photos of himself as a baby (this question will seem more significant later on). Unable to sleep, Nick offers to cook a midnight snack of scrambled eggs. A note tied to a rock is thrown through their kitchen window and, after they have retrieved the note from a playful Asta, they have a half-chewed clue that throws suspicion on Polly's husband, Phil. After all this exertion, they sleep through the next day, and end up having breakfast served to them the next evening. Once again, the film foregrounds time and its passing (the butler who serves them breakfast cannot seem to make them understand that it is six thirty in the *evening*), showing daily routine interrupted by the investigation.

The final third of the film revolves around a new location. Examining Polly's apartment, Nick discovers that the murderer has been keeping a surveillance of her trysts with Robert from the corresponding apartment above. Nick discovers a listening device built into the roof of Polly's room, and a makeshift ladder. In the basement of the block of flats, Nick finds another corpse, that of the building's janitor. The suspects are called to the apartment for a summing-up of the case, though Nick professes to be baffled as to the identity of the murderer. This is contrasted with Nora, who is, at least, able to clear up the identification of the victim. She names him as Pedro Dominges, once her father's gardener, and produces a photograph of him in service. The handling of this visual evidence is interesting: we are denied a look at the photograph, so that our only view of Pedro has been the one shot of his corpse on the floor. We may or may not have been quick enough to note the length of his white moustache.

As in *The Thin Man*, Nick's plan is to describe the progress of the case in the hope that the murderer will say something to incriminate himself. He demonstrates how the note thrown through the kitchen window was a poor attempt at faking illiteracy by pointing to the correct spelling of the word 'married'. However, it is not until he looks at the photograph of Pedro (and observes how short his moustache was six years ago) that Nick realises David has been lying. The revelation of the murderer is very different to its equivalent scene in the first film. There, we will recall, the naming of Macauley prompted a swift punch that despatched him as a threat. Here, however, the accusations levelled at David lead him to pull out a gun and deliver a speech that reveals his true colours. It is only after Nick has made these accusations that we see the photograph of Pedro – it is offered not as a clue with which we can guess David is guilty but as a piece of evidence supporting Nick's thesis, produced



after the fact. The detail that incriminates David is noteworthy: a long white moustache on a man associated with Nora's father, a physical representation of the film's constant allusions to a shared past withheld from us.

The discovery of Pedro's corpse is thus the plot point that leads to the solution of the case. That it should occur so arbitrarily (a stray bullet aimed at Nick blows the lock off the packing case into which Pedro's corpse has been stuffed) and so late in the film merits discussion. Richard Layman notes that in the first 34 page draft of the screen treatment, 'Hammett had not finally decided on a murderer'.<sup>285</sup> The second 115 page draft, however, places its important clues at the beginning of the story. The treatment, submitted on 17 September 1935, begins with the discovery of Pedro's body, lying on the front doorstep of Nick and Nora's house. His dying words ('Mees Selma Young' - he is trying to identify 'Miss Selma's young man' as his murderer) launch the investigation. David makes the incriminating comment regarding the length of Pedro's moustache during his first appearance in the treatment.<sup>286</sup> In a very traditional manner, Hammett lays his clues as unobtrusively as possible.

Why, then, did Goodrich and Hackett move these plot points to the end of their screenplay? Such drastic alterations have massive implications on the narrative as a mystery story, as well as on our perception of David as a potential suspect. If, as I have argued, the film has configured Robert as a negative version of what a husband can be, David has been offered as an alternative romantic interest for Selma throughout. The considerable charm of James Stewart's performance adds to this expectation that he will serve a similar role to Tommy in the first film, protecting the hysterical Selma from herself and forming another positive couple. The confounding of these expectations challenges the assumption that a viable heterosexual relationship

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<sup>285</sup> Layman, Richard, *Shadow Man: The Life of Dashiell Hammett* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp. 158-159.

<sup>286</sup> Hammett, Dashiell, 'After the Thin Man: Part 1', *The New Black Mask*, 5 (April 1986), p. 64.

could grow out of 'saving' Selma – it is Nora who stands in David's line of fire, shielding her cousin and presenting a positive, courageous aspect of femininity. By delaying the presentation of evidence linking David to the crimes, Hackett and Goodrich's screenplay positions him as a benign character, making his exposure disconcerting and unexpected.

With regard to the conventions of the classical mystery narrative, such a strategy seems unjustifiable. Indeed, it is a doubly problematic moment, since the forceful change in David's character strains credibility. This dramatic reversal of expectations allows the confession scene to deal explicitly with previously raised issues surrounding the performance of identity. James Stewart's face is transformed by grimaces (as though his body suddenly reveals energies heretofore hidden), his slow measured tones become a bark and he develops a manic giggle. As the evidence against him grows, and his guilt is physicalised, lighting from above casts sinister shadows onto his face. As well as dramatising the public disclosure of a repressed private state, these histrionic effects draw attention to the way the self is performed.

Van Dyke's mise-en-scene places David alone at the window, emphasising his status as a cornered animal. The murderer is shown to be an outcast from society, spatially separated by his homicidal acts from the crowd (we might call them an audience) of detectives, society swells and hoodlums. The scene of confession is also a scene of liberation, in which the murderer speaks without deceit of his motives and methods. That David's performance of innocence should be so understated and his unburdening so over the top is interesting in itself. Perversity is displaced into mania: David has maintained a friendship with Selma for years as he plotted her destruction, as well as listening in through a concealed microphone to the love-making of Robert and Polly (finding out that David would have heard everything that took place in her

apartment, Polly exclaims, 'Holy smoke!'). However, the film is also making a point about the self within the couple. *After the Thin Man* has continually invoked memories of a shared past, and suggested the disturbing notion that individual perceptions of this past can vary. Just as the audience finds their perception of David to be incorrect, so Selma discovers that her suitor has been deranged by rejection. Standing in front of his audience, David describes his plans for the future:

*David:* I got six bullets in this gun. One for her, one for myself, yeah, one for myself (*he giggles insanely*), and the rest of them for anybody who tries to stop me!

David and Selma demonstrate the potential for resentment and obsession within the self, a notional couple who can only be conceived of together in death.

Of course, such a bleak outcome is averted. For the film's final scene, we return to a familiar location, that of a train carriage. However, whereas the previous journey was fixed geographically (New York to San Francisco), it is important here that we are not sure where Nick and Nora are headed. Important, too, is our recollection of the equivalent scene in *The Thin Man*, in which Nick and Nora toasted the newly married Dorothy and Tommy, before each couple retired to a festive marital bed. Here Selma is very much alone, a fact emphasised by her request to kiss Nick and Nora's joke about it being habit-forming. Having administered her peck on the cheek, Selma retires to her cabin. Nick expresses delight that Nora and he are alone at last, expressing satisfaction with his conjugal situation ('just you and a toothbrush'). The scene is restating again the problem of depicting the married couple, and what one can do with them. Nora announces her pregnancy through the knitting of child's booties, an unspoken deduction that she asks her husband to make. Nick and Nora are still not alone, and the promise of a child announces the necessity to enforce a

temporal structure on the marriage. It also ups the stakes – how can *parents* be detectives?

### ***Another Thin Man***

*Another Thin Man*'s trailer bombastically announces its subject 'twice as funny as the two Thin Man movies that have gone before', a statement that defines the film's project and its problem. In attempting to surpass its predecessors, *Another Thin Man* operates on the credo 'bigger is better', over-loading its narrative with material. Even the trailer seems too long. Book-ended by announcements of Powell's return to the screen,<sup>287</sup> it promises the familiar spectacles of the series (sexual banter, action and mystery) enhanced by extra elements (the 'blessed event' of Nick Jr., 'plus two startling new personalities', Sheldon Leonard and Don Costello). Unintentionally, the trailer reflects *Another Thin Man*'s chief difficulty - it feels cluttered.

The end of *After the Thin Man* made Nick and Nora parents, forcing domesticity onto a formula that previously satirised the bourgeois ideal. In this respect, the third Thin Man film is a transitional text, the dissolution of the original creative team (Hammett, Hackett and Goodrich left the series after this third collaboration) corresponding with a polarisation of domesticity and mystery. Subsequent entries struggle to justify Nick and Nora's carefree jaunts into crime,<sup>288</sup> and there is a growing preoccupation with the past of the couple, as though placing them within a patriarchal tradition validates their roles as parents.

My readings of *The Thin Man* and *After the Thin Man* have positioned Nick and Nora as commentators upon their movement through contrasting social worlds. I

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<sup>287</sup> Powell 'was returning to work after a two-year bout with cancer'. Kotsilibas-Davis, James and Loy, Myrna, *Myrna Loy: Being and Becoming*, p. 161.

<sup>288</sup> Frances Goodrich admitted the implausibility: 'Two sophisticated people can't have a child and go through the things they went through.' Goodrich, David L., *The Real Nick and Nora: Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 113.

have argued that diegetic cohesion across the two films (that ‘something new’ of which Van Dyke was so proud<sup>289</sup>) has permitted the Charles couple to occupy a distanced yet engaged social role, over the Christmas period in *The Thin Man* and New Year in *After the Thin Man*. Subsequence becomes a stylistic and thematic preoccupation in *After the Thin Man*, which reflects and reverses situations, framings and dialogue from the first film.

*Another Thin Man* disrupts this pattern with a new temporality. The film is set over a year later, culminating with Nick Jr.’s first birthday party.<sup>290</sup> Significantly, the adventures of Nick and Nora are now scheduled around the growth of their son, and while their bourgeois standing is subverted whenever possible,<sup>291</sup> the once-irresponsible couple are now burdened with childcare. The narrative implications were clear to Albert Hackett, who ruefully noted that, with the introduction of Nick Jr., ‘We just made it doubly hard for ourselves.’<sup>292</sup>

This leads to a contradiction that *Another Thin Man* and its sequels struggle to resolve. How can Nick and Nora continue to solve crimes as parents, and what part can Nick Jr. play in the narrative? While the first two films have thrived on the confluence of mystery and the domestic, the presence of a child insists upon these elements’ separation. The detrimental effect upon plot coherence, and the consequent impact upon Nick and Nora’s gender dynamic, has been noted by previous commentators,<sup>293</sup> but always as a process of continuous decline. In my remaining discussion of the series, I argue that each film proposes different solutions with which

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<sup>289</sup> Koszarski, Richard, *Hollywood Directors 1914-1940*, p. 314.

<sup>290</sup> ‘They’d added Nick Charles Jr., to the script, leaving Bill incredulous. “Why do we want this kid?” he groaned. “First thing you know, he’ll be in kindergarten, then prep school, then college. How old will that make us?”’ Kotsilibas-Davis, James and Loy, Myrna, *Myrna Loy: Being and Becoming*, p. 162.

<sup>291</sup> Nick’s habit of calling Nora ‘Mommy’ is more irony than identification.

<sup>292</sup> Goodrich, David L., *The Real Nick and Nora*, p. 130.

<sup>293</sup> See Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, pp. 86-87, and Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry*, pp. 98-101.

to attend to Nick Jr., leading to a splintering of the over-arching Thin Man diegesis and the ongoing Charles marriage.

### **Nick Jr. and narrative**

The first scene between Nick and Nora emphatically asserts business as usual. Nick cracks wise about infidelity and Nora dismisses it. He patronises the ‘little woman’ and she throws a cushion at him. A phone call from a family acquaintance disturbs their fun, with Nora accepting an invitation to the country against Nick’s wishes. Suspicious characters announce themselves – a chauffeur, a shifty babysitter, a bellhop. The latter (an old crony of Nick’s, naturally) tries to pocket some of Nora’s jewellery. We are just ten minutes into the movie.

This near-hysterical restatement of Thin Man conventions establishes Nick and Nora’s comic eccentricity as much through their enactment of parenthood as through their relationship to each other or to alcohol. These reenactments of the familiar marital ‘spectacle’<sup>294</sup> attempt to define a narrative position for Nick Jr., as in the exchange between Nick, Nora and the crooked bellhop, which recycles dialogue from *The Thin Man* to that end. ‘I’ll be a monkey’s uncle!’ the would-be thief exclaims. He is introduced to Nora as ‘Creeps’ Binder (Harry Bellaver), a character that Nick once ‘sent up the river’, and Nora tells her infant son, ‘Your father has such lovely friends.’ As in previous films, emotions are cause for deprecation rather than solemnity. ‘We like him,’ says Nora of her son, as Nick feigns fatherly modesty. The couple’s flirtatious marital conversation continues, but now their subject is their son.

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<sup>294</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 84.

The effort expended to integrate Nick Jr. into the world of “Creeps” et al. is palpable, and the rest of the film struggles to maintain an equivalent synthesis. David Goodrich notes the hesitations built into the screenplay:

In his story, Hammett described Nicky Jr. as a ‘bored’ baby. Albert [Hackett] later wrote, ‘[That] was funny to read but not to see – unfortunately, on the screen a bored baby looks like a sub-normal baby.’ Choosing other words, Frances and Albert introduced Nicky Jr. in their screenplay as a ‘fat, year-old boy who is interested in very little besides eating and sleeping. He eats anything that comes to hand and can sleep anywhere. He seldom laughs and never cries and doesn’t think his parents are amusing.’<sup>295</sup>

While the film attempts to link Nick Jr. with Asta (having them both sleep in bureau drawers, having Asta protect the child), it cannot overcome their fundamental difference: Asta accompanies Nick and Nora’s forays into the world of crime, but Nick Jr. cannot. Neither can he replace Asta, whose importance to the series’ identity is asserted by his ‘And Asta’ screen credit, and the graphic behind the titles.<sup>296</sup> While Asta’s narrative role remains essentially the same throughout the series, Nick Jr.’s presence in scenes often feels contrived, as though struggling to justify the character’s existence.

Take the introductory shot of the infant, lying in his cot playing with Asta’s bone, an image that acknowledges both the potential castration of a winning formula and the inertia noted by Goodrich. Later in the movie, Nora will place the baby on a sleeping Nick, directing the child to play with his father’s moustache. The child clambers over William Powell, mussing his face. With each of the child’s improvised actions, the film cuts back to inserts of Myrna Loy applauding the baby’s progress, speaking lines that we must assume were written in reaction to the child’s movements.

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<sup>295</sup> Goodrich, David, *The Real Nick and Nora*, p. 130.

<sup>296</sup> MGM’s awareness of the dog’s contribution to the series’ identity is evident from a curious document submitted to the PCA: lyrics for ‘Asta’s Love Song’ which (mercifully) never made it to the screen. I have reproduced the offending article as an appendix. Wright, Bob and Forrest, Chet. ‘Asta’s Love Song’, 24 November 1936. MPAA files for *After the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

It's a moment that characterises the tyranny of the child, relying entirely upon Powell and Loy's charm as performers to make the baby interesting. Without the involvement of adults, Nick Jr. cannot *do* anything at this age and so his scenes cannot affect or advance the plot. Scenes of father, mother, child and pet together remain few, as though such a gathering might stop the narrative completely.<sup>297</sup>

In 1932, the kidnap and murder of Charles Lindbergh's baby son held the nation in horrified suspense.<sup>298</sup> Despite the careful avoidance of a kidnap plot (the one narrative that would justify Nick Jr.'s presence), the film cannot fail to evoke the Lindbergh incident. Thus, 'Nick Charles Jr.' echoes 'Charles A. Lindbergh Jr.', while the New Jersey manor and the fierce guard dog recall the milieu of the Lindbergh estate.<sup>299</sup> These allusions raise questions of tone and taste,<sup>300</sup> playing to our certain knowledge that a post-Lindbergh PCA would never condone the comic treatment of such a distressing topic. The film flirts with kidnap, having one villain indirectly threaten Nick Jr., and another stage a fake kidnapping at the film's denouement, but

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<sup>297</sup> The internal chronology of the series, and the necessity not to age the stars prematurely, explains the decision to portray Nick Jr. as a baby. MGM might have been further swayed by Paramount's success with 'Baby Leroy', an infant who became a box-office draw after appearing with Maurice Chevalier in *A Bedtime Story* (Norman Taurog, 1933, Paramount), and was then partnered with W. C. Fields in *The Old Fashioned Way* (1934, William Beaudine, Paramount) and *It's a Gift* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1934, Paramount). In 1939, the year of *Another Thin Man*'s release, Universal had attempted to imitate Paramount's success by promoting their own 'Baby Sandy'.

<sup>298</sup> The child was taken from its nursery at the Lindbergh's home in Hopewell, New Jersey on 1 March 1932. Almost immediately, press coverage worked the public into a fever pitch. A number of rewards were offered and false clues followed before a truck driver discovered the child's corpse in a shallow grave about a mile from the Lindbergh's house on 12 May. In September, Bronx resident Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested and his voice identified by Lindbergh as one of the ransomers. Hauptmann was not executed until 3 April 1936. Over this four-year period, the American public were kept apprised of the tragedy through frequent newsreel footage, a swathe of reportage that Thomas Doherty describes as a 'cultural shockwave': Doherty, Thomas, *Pre-code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934* (1999, New York: Columbia University Press), p. 218. For a full account of the Lindbergh kidnapping and its repercussions, see Ross, Walter S., *The Last Hero: Charles A. Lindbergh* (1974, New York: Manor), pp. 194-228, and the autobiography of one of Hauptmann's prosecutors, Frank, Martin M., *Diary of a D. A.* (New York: Popular Library, 1961), pp. 161-162.

<sup>299</sup> After the kidnap, the Lindberghs bought a vicious police dog named Thor to protect their second son, Jon. Ross, Walter S., *The Last Hero*, p. 214.

<sup>300</sup> One is reminded of Alfred Hitchcock reprimanding himself over the 'grave error' of killing a child, and one considerably older than a baby, in *Sabotage* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1936, Gaumont British). See Truffaut, François, *Hitchcock* (London: Panther, 1969), p. 119.



anxieties over infant harm find violent and comic release elsewhere. Nick knocks down the threatening villain, while the resolution of the fake kidnap is played for farce – however, these events occur *around* Nick Jr., his presence in dialogue far outweighing his screen time.

*Another Thin Man* establishes a pattern for its sequels, in which an extended sequence with Nick Jr. at the beginning of the film gives way to fewer appearances once the mystery plot takes hold. In this film, Nick Jr.’s first scene ends with ‘Creeps’ promising to throw a baby party. While this allows the child to be a focus of the film’s finale, it also ensures an intrusion upon the mystery’s solution. Later films will dispense with this concession to Nick Jr., excluding him from their concluding scenes.<sup>301</sup>

Early on in *Another Thin Man*, Nick Charles is asked, ‘What’s the idea of the kid?’ His flippant reply - ‘Well, we have a dog and he was lonesome!’ – eloquently summarises the narrative problem Nick Jr. represents. This off-hand deprecation of parenthood, one of many in the film, articulates an anxiety over the future of the series, a worry that reproducing the Thin Man format may hasten its decline.

### **Peopling the old dark house**

Whilst previous Thin Man films have concluded with the murderer’s duplicity exposed, almost every secondary character in *Another Thin Man* is revealed to have a dual identity. The theme is established humorously at the start of the film, with the bellhop ‘Creeps’ bringing criminality into the domestic. By the end of the movie, however, the exposure of Nick Jr.’s nurse ‘Dorothy’ as ex-con-made-good Agnes has no narrative import whatsoever. The film’s obsessive interest in disguise creates a

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<sup>301</sup> *Song of the Thin Man* is an interesting exception to this rule.

world of mutable identity, as if hoping this will ease Nick and Nora's transition into parenthood. However, the ensuing confusion over what is known and unknown weakens our protagonists' connection to, and mastery over, the social worlds of the movie. Accordingly, the glut of obscurely motivated secondary characters severely diminishes the effect of each plot revelation.

The mystery plot begins with Colonel MacFey (C. Aubrey Smith), a business partner of Nora's late father, asking Nick down to his Long Island house. MacFey reveals that his fortune was acquired through crooked means, and asks for Nick's protection from ex-employee Phil Church (Sheldon Leonard), a man who served time for complicity in MacFey's swindling. The film establishes a correspondence between a problematic past (the belief that Nora's father, and fortune, was benign) and an imagined future (Church's threats to MacFey take the form of grisly prophecies). In fact, Church's plan hinges upon him *pretending* to be the killer. At the end of the film, Nick reveals the actual murderer to be MacFey's adopted daughter Lois (Virginia Grey), who has been leading a double life as 'Linda Mills', Church's girlfriend. In this way, the film structures its mystery around the past of the Charles couple, subverting series conventions (a 'fake' murderer) through the character of a duplicitous child.

The potential interest of this premise is compromised by its hyperactive treatment. Dum Dum (Abner Biberman), Church's henchman, imitates a corpse on a lonely country road in a campaign of terror against MacFey. Mrs. Bellam (Phyllis Gordon), MacFey's housekeeper, pretends to be Lois' mother to get to the inheritance. A gangster, 'Diamond Back' Vogel (Don Costello), pretends to be a police detective while spying on Church. Even the screenplay misrepresents itself.

Hammett had recycled one of his *Black Mask* stories, *The Farewell Murder*,<sup>302</sup> for the treatment – this is a Continental Op story masquerading as a Thin Man adventure.

The emphasis on doubling, not just of identities but also of types (Lois' two suitors, two policemen, two 'bad' girls), leads to a vagueness of performance. This has not been a problem for the series before – I am thinking of Cesar Romero's precise embodiment of the slick gigolo in *The Thin Man* – which has demonstrated a facility in 'exaggerations, or minimalizations of the desirable real'.<sup>303</sup> In particular, C. Aubrey Smith, usually a confidently blustering presence, often seems unsure of whether he is being threatened, threatening, or both.

The disruption of the series' previous unity of place (New York in the first film, San Francisco in the second) is another manifestation of doubling. At MacFey's request, the Charles family drives down to his Long Island estate. The gathering of suspects evokes a mystery tradition opposed to the hard-boiled, in which supernatural forces impinge upon the natural, substantiating Phil Church's deathly prophecies in a setting where corpses may vanish from roadsides.<sup>304</sup> Therefore, the trip out of the city corresponds with a movement into unfamiliar narrative space.

These scenes in Long Island display a weird tonal palette, juxtaposing Nick and Nora's wit with violence unprecedented in the series. A guard dog is killed, and shortly afterwards MacFey's throat is cut, his corpse beaten and shot.<sup>305</sup> The manner of these deaths is so elaborately grotesque, and so different from the series' previous shootings, that the film cannot find a satisfactory or consistent tone with which to

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<sup>302</sup> Hammett, Dashiell, *The Continental Op* (London: Picador, 1984), pp. 219-255.

<sup>303</sup> Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter*, p. 191.

<sup>304</sup> Another contemporary film that uses the space of the remote country mansion as an intersection for comedy, mystery and horror is *The Cat and the Canary* (Elliott Nugent, 1939, Paramount). However, its emphasis upon the ghoulish puts it more in the tradition of *The Old Dark House* (James Whale, 1932, Universal).

<sup>305</sup> Again, the film takes its lead from the (more gruesome) source story, in which the Op finds the dog's carcass decapitated, skinned and barbecued. Hammett, Dashiell, *The Continental Op*, p. 231.

present them. For example, look at how MacFey's guard dog is used as a source of both comedy and horror. When it places its paws on Nick's shoulders as a gesture of friendship, we are amused. However, it is later revealed that a similar canine greeting allowed the killer to strike, dispatching the dog with a knife. The treatment of this one gesture is emblematic of the film's tendency to portray extremes of comedy and violence, failing to synthesise these elements. Yet we cannot assume that the film is unaware of its tonal weirdness – it has already made a connection between the guard dog and Asta (the small dog hiding from the big dog), restated when Asta finds the guard dog's corpse. The tonal disparity is disturbing.

It is true that the country is positioned as a space of irrationality ('the swimming pool's on fire'), from which Nick advises MacFey to leave ('If I were you, Colonel, I'd move to New York'). However, this connection between polarities of tone and location is problematic, separating mystery elements from the domestic and comedic. In this way, *Another Thin Man* threatens to overbalance the most valuable asset of the series, the democratic marriage of Nick and Nora Charles.

### **Socialising Nora**

My discussion of the first two Thin Man films has drawn upon the work of Stanley Cavell and Andrew Britton to position Nora as intellectually autonomous and socially subversive. While clearly a Cavellian example of 'the new woman',<sup>306</sup> desirous of education, she is empowered enough to teach, making her marriage to Nick a contest of equals in which mutual fulfillment is the prize.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 65.

<sup>307</sup> Unlike the protagonists that Cavell discusses in *Pursuits of Happiness*, however, Nick and Nora start on an equal footing (I have described the staging of their first scene in *The Thin Man* as the beginning of 'an intellectual contest'). In Cavell's comedies of remarriage, while mutuality is desired, it is always a matter of one partner catching up with another.

As noted above, the introduction of Nick Jr. moves Nora closer to the conventionalised bourgeois mother.<sup>308</sup> Kathrina Glitre writes,

Parental responsibilities shift the dynamics of Nick and Nora's relationship considerably. Nick is increasingly aligned with Nicky Jr, a process that redefines his ambiguous morality as boyish 'naughtiness', while Nora becomes ever more matronly and authoritative.<sup>309</sup>

This alliance of boyishness corresponds with changes in the way the marriage operates in public. The opening hotel room scene, in which Nick drinks and plays while Nora organises their room, sets out this new relation to responsibility. Where previously Nora had acted the adult (e.g., the pop-gun scene in *The Thin Man*) in private moments, the presence of others makes her role seem like a social responsibility.

It is not that *Another Thin Man* and its sequels remove the sexualised fun of Nick and Nora's crime solving; to do so would be to destroy the unique appeal of the series. It is more that, in asserting Nora's suitability for motherhood, the films tend to reassure us of this fun through Nick. Basinger sees Nick's comic disreputability as a means of power over Nora,<sup>310</sup> while Glitre associates Nick with the trickster tradition in American culture.<sup>311</sup> In my discussion of the remaining *Thin Man* films, I wish to contradict Basinger's thesis by arguing that the films attempt a positive presentation of motherhood that does not preclude glamour or excitement. However, while the series still makes space for Nora in this way, it can only do so by announcing her movement from the domestic world into that of the criminal, where once this had been a given.

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<sup>308</sup> See Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry*, pp. 119-124, Winokur, Mark, *American Laughter*, p. 192, and Harvey, James, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>309</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 86.

<sup>310</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman's View*, pp. 319-320.

<sup>311</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 81.

I am reminded here of Robin Wood's comparison of the two versions of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1934, Gaumont British; 1956, Paramount), in which he ponders the differences between each film's kidnapped child. In the British version, Bob and Jill Lawrence (Leslie Banks and Edna Best) hunt for their daughter Betty (Nova Pilbeam) – in the American remake, Benjamin and Jo McKenna (James Stewart and Doris Day) for their son Hank (Christopher Olsen). In the former, Betty is on the verge of womanhood; in the latter, Hank is a much younger son. Wood asks,

Why does Betty change sex to become Hank? Tentatively, I think we may invoke Freud's theory that the woman who is denied the phallus sees her child as substitute/compensation, and that this is especially the case when the child is male. The narrative, one might suggest, provides Jo with a son as compensation for renouncing her career, her autonomy, her power outside the home; Jill, presented as totally contented with her position, has apparently renounced nothing.<sup>312</sup>

While Nora does not renounce autonomy (Basinger suggests that she does), her diminished involvement in the mystery plots is directly connected to her role as mother. What's interesting is that Nick Jr. is *not* presented as compensation, in that we never see any depth of feeling between mother and son. This becomes even more pronounced in *Shadow of the Thin Man* and *Song of the Thin Man*, where a servant acts as nursemaid to the boy. The child's maleness does not signify satisfaction/lack in Nora, and it is fun to speculate how the series might be different had the protagonists been given a daughter.

However, Nora's role as mother does provoke a more determined placing of her within patriarchy. It achieves this by establishing a connection between her deceased father and her infant son. While *After the Thin Man* had happily shown Nora's half of the family to be fusty mental incompetents, *Another Thin Man* frets

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<sup>312</sup> Wood, Robin, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 368.

over Nick Jr.'s lineage. Briefly besmirching Nora's father's reputation (and thus, her inheritance) through association with MacFey allows the film to validate patriarchal accession when that reputation is cleared. The couple's relieved exchange retains Nick's disreputability and mystery while asserting the couple's bourgeois values: 'My father was just as honest as yours,' Nora says, and Nick replies, 'Someday you'll find out what a hot recommendation that is!'<sup>313</sup>

The scene of Nora watching Nick Jr. prod his sleeping father's face illustrates her reactive relationship to patriarchy. Ostensibly it is a moment she controls (urging the child to pull harder on Nick's moustache etc.) but it also separates Nora from father and son, cutting from them to inserts of her indulging and enjoying her two 'boys'. This association of boyishness and cuteness continues when Nick wakes up, as Nora tells him it's his 'responsibility' to tell the child about 'life'. As Nick groggily attempts to follow her train of thought, she continues: 'If he were a girl, that'd be different, I'd do it. But you know more about boys than I do, so you ought to tell him.' Nora cedes authority to her husband, who, typically, does not really want it. Yet given my focus upon the role of education in Nick and Nora's relationship, the moment is significant: Nick's responsibility for Nick Jr.'s (in this case, sexual) education weakens the detective-sidekick dynamic he shares with Nora.

Writing of Nora in *Another Thin Man*, Nochimson observes that she 'remains front and centre, very much alive, and, though possessed of fluctuating degrees of influence, she remains a focus of desire.'<sup>314</sup> However, what does change is Nora's relation to other female characters, and the way she is viewed by other men. Unlike Dorothy in *The Thin Man* and Selma in *After the Thin Man*, Lois is presented as

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<sup>313</sup> Another example comes when MacFey states that Nora doesn't drink, upon which she steals the key to the liquor cabinet for Nick. At this stage in the narrative, Nora does not drink – it is important to my argument that this is contradicted in the later scene at the West Indies Club.

<sup>314</sup> One might facetiously observe that casting Myrna Loy guarantees some degree of desirability. Nochimson, Martha, *Screen Couple Chemistry*, p. 112.

strong enough to look after herself, even before she becomes a suspect. Nora's role as protector of the secondary female is dispensed with, and Lois' one 'girls together' scene with Nora is later shown to be a ruse for the construction of an alibi.

In keeping with its 'bigger is better' approach, the film features three attractive secondary females – Lois/Linda Mills, 'Dorothy'/Agnes,<sup>315</sup> and 'Smitty'/Mrs. H. Culverton Smith (Muriel Hutchison). All three struggle for narrative weight or interest, with 'Dorothy' being removed as a potential threat very early on, and 'Smitty' getting her one big scene very late in the movie. Interestingly, Nora is denied any interaction with them, and denied an equivalent of the established concluding scene that places her in benign relation to a younger female character. Indeed, the film's final moment of female interaction is poisonous, and excludes Nora. As she is led away by the police, Lois sneers, 'Better luck on your next racket!' at Mrs. Bellam the housekeeper, who had shammed motherhood in order to lay claim to the MacFey inheritance.

While Nora's autonomy is threatened by motherhood, it is not renounced in the way that Basinger suggests. Rather, it suffers compromises most clearly seen in the couple's redefined movement through social space. Once she becomes a mother, Nora is consistently assumed to be Nick's mistress, a way for the films to insist, outside of domestic space, that glamour and motherhood are not mutually exclusive. However, changing the way Nick and Nora behave in public has an effect upon their private moments.

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<sup>315</sup> Ruth Hussey is just on the cusp of prominence in 1939, taking larger parts in *Northwest Passage* (King Vidor, 1940, MGM) and *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940, MGM) the next year. Her presence in *Another Thin Man* may have resulted from her previous job: she had come from playing a supporting character in *Fast and Furious* (Busby Berkeley, 1939, MGM), a Thin Man copycat starring Franchot Tone and Ann Southern as a married couple who sell rare books, and solve murders on the side.



This is most keenly felt in the breaking of a pleasant convention: the conjugal scenes that end *The Thin Man* and *After the Thin Man*. With the introduction of Nick Jr., Nick and Nora find privacy only as they invade others', making investigation a flight from domesticity. Writing of the absence of children in screwball marriages, Cavell suggests that 'children, if they appear, must appear as intruders. Then one's obligation would be to make them welcome, to make room for them, to make them be at home, hence to transform one's idea of home, showing them that they are not responsible for their parents' happiness, nor for their parents' unhappiness.'<sup>316</sup> The remaining instalments of the series address this obligation in various ways, though one symptom remains constant: each film ends with Nick and Nora in company, insisting that, as parents, the couple *cannot* retreat from society.

### **'Adoringly, Bella Spruce'**

It is typical of the film's repositioning of Nora that her chief engagement with other women is imaginary. When the police question Nora about MacFey's death, they relate stories of Nick's past paramours, the improbably named Bella Spruce and Lettie Finhadden. However, the film does not use this gossip<sup>317</sup> to express Nora's anxiety over losing her allure, but as a way of re-introducing her to the mystery plot.

The reference to an unsuspected past resembles the threat to Nora's father's reputation. Just as that plot point assured us of the Charles' respectability as parents, the Spruce-Finhadden material asserts that Nick and Nora can still be funny and sexy *despite* being parents. In other words, it is just as emphatic as the early hotel room

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<sup>316</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 59.

<sup>317</sup> These names from a travelling salesman's repertoire come with their own tall tales: we are told that Bella was the daughter of a coal magnate who wanted to set up Nick with his own agency, and that Lettie was a lighthouse-keeper's daughter.

scenes – but in this case, the point is that nothing has changed.<sup>318</sup> This familiarity can only be revived when the child is absent.

When Nick goes haring off after a lead, he decoys Nora by saying the baby is crying. Basinger deplores such moments for excluding Nora from the ‘fun’ of the chase.<sup>319</sup> However, Nora does not stay at home (and, importantly, Nick does not expect her to). She follows her own set of leads, as successfully as Nick. The following sequence at the West Indies Club refocuses our attention upon Nick and Nora as a couple. It plays out their mutual attraction as competition, moving their private conversation into a public space, the comedic investigation of crime, the play around infidelity: all those things that made *The Thin Man* and *After the Thin Man* so distinctive.

This move into a comfortable environment feels overdue. An hour has elapsed, and this is the first scene in a drinking establishment. The nightclub is a gateway into the space of the underworld, provoking a shift in Nick and Nora’s mode of behaviour. Crucially, the scene engineers a reunion between them that resembles a pick-up (she writes him a note signed Bella Spruce), emphasising the connection between criminal investigation and sexual excitement. The mise-en-scene of the nightclub encourages our sense of the couple being irresistibly drawn together.<sup>320</sup> As Nick enters, two West Indian dancers (Carmen D’Antonio and Miguel Fernandez Mila) are performing a complex choreography, their bodies entwined. Behind them, we see a large group of men clustered in one spot. Nick leaves a table of available chorus girls who do not speak his language to find the one woman who does, and he and Nora ‘spontaneously pick up their reciprocal style of conversation, despite their

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<sup>318</sup> The reappearance of Nat Pendleton as John Guild, the policeman from *The Thin Man*, is another familiar element introduced in this portion of the film.

<sup>319</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman’s View*, p. 320.

<sup>320</sup> The scene continues the theme of doubling, with the exotic hat-check girl (Anita Carmago) slipping into Brooklynese, and a waiter (Nestor Paiva) discreetly referring to Nick as ‘Senor Jones’.

public location and the presence of others'.<sup>321</sup> He dispels the crowd of suitors with a ruse, with which Nora plays along, and there is a repetition of the couple's very first scene in *The Thin Man*, with Nora lining up her drinks to match Nick.<sup>322</sup>

While the sequence continues to distance Nora from the process of investigation – she ends up dancing with an amorous European (Rafael Storm) while Nick questions a suspect – it does so by characterising her as wife and sidekick, rather than as mother. The scene ends with Nick seeing off his Continental rival, and taking Nora in his arms upon the dancefloor. As the club recovers from the aftermath of a brawl, Nick and Nora dance in the footsteps of D'Antonio and Mila, a couple (momentarily) restored.

### **'You know how girls are!'**

Despite her complaints that she never has any 'fun', Nora's separation from the investigation continues when they visit Linda Mills' apartment, with Nick contriving that the landlady Miss Dolley (Marjorie Main) thinks them strangers. While Nora is kept downstairs by the landlady, Nick cases Linda Mills' apartment, finds her test shot for the MacFey killing, is held up by gangsters who come in the window, and then is rescued by the police. The mystery narrative becomes intolerably compressed as a result of its distance from the comedy of the couple.

As in previous films, Nick is investigating a mysterious apartment space, a site of potential licentiousness and clues. Linda Mills' apartment is suggestively dressed, conveying luxury and sexual freedom. The walls are adorned with ornate drapes, an oriental screen stands in one corner, while the bedroom is full of inscribed photographs from handsome young men. On the mantel sits a classical statue of two

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<sup>321</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, p. 82.

<sup>322</sup> Earlier, MacFey has stated that Nora 'doesn't drink'. The contradiction here indicates the shift into another behavioral mode.

lovers in passionate embrace, and (a sure sign of decadence) the large bed is unmade. Before the intrusion of the gangsters, Nick peruses the bookshelves, the camera moving along the lurid titles.<sup>323</sup> The mise-en-scene goes as far as it can to suggest sex, without literally stating it.

Similarly, the casting of Marjorie Main acts as an insurance policy,<sup>324</sup> her salty homeliness counteracting any suspicion of real immorality.<sup>325</sup> Miss Dolley displaces sexual activity onto rowdiness, telling Nick that her tenant holds ‘noisy parties’ and that there are frequent ‘fights in her flat’. Indeed, her description of Linda Mills is fond, almost wistful: ‘The way she slaps that make-up on, you’d think she was an old-timer. But she don’t need to, she’s real pretty.’ It’s a nice moment, serving plot and character. The description’s vagueness allows that Linda Mills might be the alias of any of the three secondary female characters (in the next scene, Guild will suggest it is ‘Dorothy’/Agnes). Equally, it provides some much-needed justification for Lois’ crimes; she is a wayward child, desperate for adulthood. This thin attempt at motivation is given credence thanks to Main’s confident delivery – and, it should be said, Miss Dolley stands out as one of the film’s few memorable supporting characters.

The scene ends with another moment of marital role-play, again enacted as a pick-up. Mentioning Nora’s prettiness to Miss Dolley, he swiftly adds that he is a

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<sup>323</sup> The titles manage to convey morbidity and sexual fixation, the mainstays of the teenage mind: they include *The Psychology of Marriage*, *The Coming of Love*, *Dangerous Love*, *All the Dead Ladies*, *The Greatest Menace of Them All*, *The Greatest Love* and *Love Comes to Helen*. ‘There must be nothing offensive about the titles of these books. Specifically, there must be no reference whatever to “marijuana”, or any other drug’. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 28 September 1939. MPAA files for *Another Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>324</sup> It is likely that the casting of Main was a direct result of PCA guidance: ‘Care will be needed in this sequence, to avoid anything suggesting that these apartments are a house of assignation, or that the landlady is a Madam’. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 17 July 1939. MPAA files for *Another Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>325</sup> Nochimson’s suggestion that Miss Dolley resembles ‘a bordello madame’ [see Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry*, p. 117] seems quite wrong. Rather, Main’s casting dissuades any such thought, in line with the PCA’s suggestions footnoted above.

married man. ‘That don’t mean a thing and you know it!’ guffaws the landlady, who then attempts to set the two of them up. When Nora gleefully announces herself as ‘Lettie Finhadden’, Nick sweeps her up in a kiss and leads her away, leaving Miss Dolly agape. ‘Well, that’s the fastest bit of work I ever did see!’ she exclaims. It is the most charming moment in the film, an affirmation that mutual excitement and surprise is still open to the marriage, and to the series. It is also a reminder that sex need not be characterised as ‘bad’ (as it has through association with Linda Mills), an assertion helped along by Miss Dolley’s clear attraction to Nick, and her approval of his pairing off with ‘Lettie’.

It will be evident that I consider the scenes at the West Indies Club and Linda Mills’ apartment the most satisfying in the film. This is problematic, given their emphasis upon the couple over the mystery. These scenes operate quite differently to the happy moments in *The Thin Man* and *After the Thin Man*; here, they are nostalgic, presented like reminiscences of what the series used to be about. The subsequent entries in the series will become more and more interested in the past, which, I shall argue, is one of the strategies that deals with the problems attendant to Nick Jr.

**‘Send me to the chair or get your kid back all in one piece’**<sup>326</sup>

My discussion of *Another Thin Man* has defined problems of tone resulting from Nick Jr.’s presence. The concomitant separation of mystery and couple comedy threatens a synthesis integral to the series so far. The final scenes of the film struggle to reconcile and revive these disparate elements, with the established sequence of exegesis and confrontation being interrupted in a way that defuses the desired build-up of suspense. As Nick gathers his suspects around the breakfast table, accusing

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<sup>326</sup> Lois’ threat succinctly opposes Nick Jr. and the resolution of the mystery.

each of them in turn, there comes the sound of a fracas from outside. It is, of course, the baby party promised/threatened by 'Creeps' at the start of the film.

Having the party interrupt the dramatic climax of the film, Nick's accusatory monologue, acknowledges the difficulty of including Nick Jr. at this stage of the narrative. Rather like the sequence with 'Creeps' at the start of the film, the scene associates Nick Jr. with a benign criminality. The camera pans across the gathering of crooks, proud fathers all, singing Nick Jr. 'Happy Boith-day'. One of their number, 'Wacky' (Shemp Howard, one of the Three Stooges) has even rented a child so that he can join the party. Their naivety and good humour makes the crooks seem like children themselves, and the scene gets a lot of fun out of mixing the language of the playground with that of the prison yard. 'Creeps' castigates 'Wacky', telling him 'We don't want no hot tot!' while another worries that putting the babies into 'the pen' will be a bad omen. It is a scene of men acting like children around their sons, emphasising masculine association over that of the family.

Compare these loveable goons with the irredeemable Lois, as cold-hearted a murderer as the series has given us. In keeping with the film's interest in double identities, Nick suggests that Lois' motive for killing her adoptive father was the desire to fund her wild life in the city. His accusation is suggestively phrased: 'That wasn't your kind of life. Your kind of life was the Linda Mills life that you've been leading ever since you got nerve enough to sneak out of the house at night after the folks went to sleep.' In other words, it is sufficient to characterise Lois as a greedy, corrupt child, with little interest in setting up a plausible motive (cf. James Stewart in *After the Thin Man*).<sup>327</sup> As a presence, Lois is strangely absent, defined only by Miss Dolley's description of her as the pretty/painted lady. The thick make-up that Lois

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<sup>327</sup> We are reminded of Miss Dolley's observation that Linda Mills wears too much make-up, like a child affecting her mother's glamour.

applies as Linda Mills is an intriguing metaphor, of glamour masking perversion, but, typically, the film presents the idea in only the weakest terms.

*Another Thin Man* is frustrating in the way it gestures towards interesting themes (e.g., fractured identity, the perversion of family - subjects that are crucial to the series at this point) but fails to give these elements adequate narrative space. Lois' parting exchange with Mrs. Bellam is exemplary: it allows Lois to exit without displaying violent defiance or regret, unjustifiable emotions given our lack of interest in the character. To put it another way, while we have cared about James Stewart in *After the Thin Man*, we have no feelings about Virginia Grey in *Another Thin Man*. Thematically, Lois' discredited mother-daughter relationship is important – it is a problem, then, that Mrs. Bellam is so insignificant.

The film's final moments come closest to realising the ever-present threat of Nick Jr.'s kidnap. After being revealed to be the murderer, Lois claims to have engineered the kidnap of Nick Jr. to ransom in return for freedom. The threat is immediately neutralised: 'Whacky' has accidentally taken Nick Jr. and left his rented baby behind. More than any other, this moment exemplifies the film's problematic tonal shifts, what we might call the distance between 'Happy Boith-day' and 'get[ting] your kid back all in one piece'. It is an ill-conceived, misjudged moment that seems especially tasteless in the light of the Lindbergh tragedy. Its place in the film – a post-climactic flurry of distress and farce – makes the moment seem throwaway, a concessionary inclusion of Nick Jr. in the drama.

At the end of the film, Nick, Nora, Asta and Nick Jr. fall back on their bed, a repetition of the familiar joke about privacy in marriage. It is a farcical image, reneging on the promise of a final family portrait. More than anything, exhaustion is

conveyed, not just for the characters but also over the issue of how the series may



Fig. 3 The exhausted family.

continue. Where previous films in the series have ended with Nick and Nora embracing, *Another Thin Man* concludes with a gesture of fatigue and, it must be said, avoidance.



## 2. Bringing Up Jr: the male child, education and environment

*Shadow of the Thin Man*

*The Thin Man Goes Home*

*Song of the Thin Man*

In the previous chapter, I suggested that the remaining three films in the Thin Man series propose variant strategies to deal with the narrative problems of domesticity, Nick Jr. and the staleness of repeated gags and situations. While this question of retaining pleasures integral to a format is relevant to any series, I want to begin by noting some of the issues particular to the Thin Man films.

A fruitful comparison might be made with any number of series (e.g., Andy Hardy, Blondie, Ma and Pa Kettle) that balance the depiction of benign domesticity against the need to advance a plot based around conflict and resolution. However, what all these sets of movies lack is the strong generic crossover of the Thin Man films - that blend of comedy, romance and mystery that distinguishes it in the marketplace. We might think of recurring elements like Asta as contributing to a brand identity (prominent on posters and in credit sequences), and which is carried over into radio's *The Adventures of the Thin Man* (1941-1950), television's *The Thin Man* (1957-1959) and musical theatre's *Nick & Nora* (1991). The popularity of the Thin Man films provoked its own cycle of 'couples-solving-crimes' films in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the aforementioned later attempts to revive the franchise. The relative lack of success of all of these can be attributed to another crucial factor: the star attraction of Powell and Loy. As Arthur Laurents, author of *Nick & Nora*, ruefully noted,

[...] the enormous popularity of the Thin Man movies had ended the existence of Nick and Nora Charles as characters; they had become flesh-and-blood William Powell and Myrna Loy. Without Powell and Loy, you couldn't have *Nick & Nora*.<sup>328</sup>

It is noteworthy that none of these attempts to revive the Thin Man franchise have bothered with Nick Jr., and in this chapter I want to address my sense that the Charles' son stands somewhat apart from the films he is in. Sometimes it's as though he's not even there (and in *The Thin Man Goes Home*, he is not) and I am interested in asking why this separation between character and narrative persists throughout the series. Where previous commentators have seen an increasing division between the comedy of Nick and Nora and the mysteries they investigate, I conceptualise this somewhat differently. Nick and Nora are just as involved in crime-solving as they ever were. It's just that Nick Jr. is so excluded from the mystery narratives, that parental duty becomes a nagging distraction.

In line with this argument, I have structured this chapter differently to its predecessor. In the first half, I examine the treatment of the figure of the male child in *Shadow of the Thin Man*, *The Thin Man Goes Home* and *Song of the Thin Man*; in the second, I conclude by discussing the mysteries in each of these films. The chapter is divided, like the films it takes as its subjects.

### **Nick Jr. and *Shadow of the Thin Man***

*Nora*: Either I'm dreaming or I've lived through this before...  
*Abrams*: Funny how I meet you at all my homicides!

The fourth film in the series begins and ends with line drawings of the Charles family. That which opens the film depicts the established team of Nick, Nora and Asta; the one that concludes it introduces Nick Jr., revealing one of the film's

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<sup>328</sup> Laurents, Arthur, *Original Story By* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 417.

projects, the settling in of a new element into a winning formula. I have described *Another Thin Man*'s strenuous efforts to involve the infant Nick Jr. in scenes of criminality. One of the curious aspects of *Shadow of the Thin Man* is the abnegation of this undertaking. The film is a new start, of sorts. While Van Dyke still directs, Hammett, Goodrich and Hackett are no longer involved. This disruption of one of the cohesive factors in the series suggests a new direction for the series, stepping out of the 'shadow' of the preceding movies.



Fig. 4 The crowded couple

One of the ways the film does this is through Nick and Nora's redefined connection with the social world. They are part of the crowd now, parents with responsibilities, and the film acknowledges this through a proliferation of scenes in public spaces (Fig. 4). While previously, the couple had gravitated between ritzy nightclubs and underworld haunts, this film repeatedly places them in 'the ordinary world', humorously accosted by the urban underclass, immigrants and the expected

cops and crooks at racetracks and wrestling arenas. The statement is clear: however unwillingly, Nick and Nora have become citizens.

This can be disconcerting, as in the opening scene, set in a public park where children play and governesses rock prams. Nick Charles is strolling through, surreptitiously reading a newspaper hidden in a book titled 'Fairy Tales'. He stops and pulls on a rein, and the camera moves down to reveal not Asta, but Nick Jr. (Dickie Hall), who is in turn leading the dog. This procession is made even stranger by the fact that the five-year old child is dressed in full military uniform.

Compare this image of civilised restriction to another contemporary father-and-son: Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller) and Boy (Johnny Sheffield) in *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (Richard Thorpe, 1939, MGM). In that film, the legitimate claim of Tarzan and Jane (Maureen O'Sullivan) to Boy is dramatised through his engagement with danger and the experience of risk - the approach of a crocodile, the bite of a poisonous spider – forming an education that Tarzan passes onto his son. The film articulates this through an imagery of connection, established by the infant Boy's grip on Tarzan's finger, the act of swimming together and, most importantly, swinging from tree to tree. This final image, instantly associated with the Tarzan series, is the most potent, acquiring further significance when Jane's betrayal of Tarzan (she believes Boy should be educated in America) leads her to cut an umbilical rope that would allow her husband to prevent Boy's forced departure. It is striking that *Shadow of the Thin Man* uses a similar imagery (the reins) to depict restriction rather than connection, indicative perhaps of Nick Jr. impinging upon the freedom of his parents.

Nick Jr.'s costuming is typical of the film's tentative references to how the war in Europe has changed the social values of America. There is something inherently problematic about this cute image of the 'little man' and his playboy father

(later the child will wear a sailor suit), a curious statement of patriotism that swiftly follows Van Dyke's credit as 'Major W. S. Van Dyke'. The absence of any direct reference to war is especially marked when one compares the Thin Man series with other contemporary detective series, recruited into a lusty defence of the home front against Axis saboteurs and double agents.<sup>329</sup> While *The Thin Man Goes Home* brings the war into its narrative, *Shadow of the Thin Man* is content to keep references at the level of Nick's command that Asta 'fall in', or, at the end of the film, his presentation of a bracelet to Nora 'for valour'.

I have called Nick a 'storyteller' in the previous chapter. Here, we see him attempting to combine a masculine pursuit (study of the racing form) with parental duty (reading Nick Jr. a fairy story). The joke of the ensuing dialogue has Nick presuming to fool his son by improvising a fairy tale about horses, and an amused Nick Jr. understanding and tolerating this situation. This advanced knowledge of adult foibles extends to a familiarity with his father (he calls him 'Nick', rather than 'Pop' or an equivalent) that permits him to directly contradict adult pretence: 'I'm not tired, you're tired'. The child's insubordinate manner is a way for the film to reject earnestness and sentimentality, but the danger of such a characterisation recalls Wood's cautionary words regarding the depiction of precocity: 'It is a concept that can easily harden or degenerate into that of the "smart kid", the premature adult, a figure denied both childhood and maturity'.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> In *The Falcon's Brother* (Stanley Logan, 1942, RKO), George Sander's hero dies fighting the Nazi menace, freeing Sanders to leave the series and hand over the mantle to his real-life brother Tom Conway. The imperative to depict movie detectives as patriots even over-rides details of period authenticity in the case of Universal's updated Sherlock Holmes series starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. See Field, Amanda J., *England's Secret Weapon: The wartime films of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2009), pp. 101-138.

<sup>330</sup> Wood, Robin, *Personal Views* (London: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1976), p. 163.

**‘In the old days, they put a lamp in the window!’**

Unbeknownst to Nick or his son, they are being observed. From a hotel suite that overlooks the park, Nora and a maid/nanny, Stella (Louise Beavers) are watching the boys through binoculars, tutting at males who stay out late to assert their independence. Stella, a blousy black domestic, is quite different to previous (anonymous) staff we have seen in *After the Thin Man*. Her race and her physicality promote a comforting image of the good and faithful servant, an assurance that Nick Jr. will be looked after when Nora is out with Nick.<sup>331</sup> One is struck by the emphasis on distance, along gender lines, in this sequence – as the women peer through binoculars, Nora despairs at her son’s mischief making him ‘more like his father’; in the park, Nick chuckles at his son’s perspicacity, a trait he associates with Nora.

Nora recalls Nick to the apartment by shaking a cocktail. The film knows this is silly, as Stella struggles to understand how Nick will hear the clinking from the park. ‘That’s Mr. Charles, isn’t it?’ asks Nora, ‘This is a cocktail, isn’t it? They’ll get together.’ This extreme self-consciousness toward the series’ inviolable tropes leads them into caricature. There is a sense, as in *Another Thin Man*, of the over-emphatic statement of familiarity to compensate for a changed domestic environment.

There is no mention of the Charles house seen in *After the Thin Man*, and we might see the occupancy of a hotel suite as another attempt at compromise: Nick and Nora have a child, but they don’t really have a home. Connected to this is a sense that motherhood alters the representation of Nora, more buttoned up than in previous films and with a slightly homier hairstyle. I will discuss the effect of motherhood on Nora’s involvement with the mystery plot in the second half of this chapter; here, I merely observe that the scene emphasises her mock sternness, implying more than ever that

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<sup>331</sup> Louise Beavers plays a similar role in *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*, discussed in chapter 3.

she is mother to both Nick and Nick Jr., with Stella acting as a feminine ally where once Nora confided only in Nick. At the same time, the script continues the established pattern of sophistication over-riding sentiment, the slick line about the ‘lamp in the window’ disavowing emotion.

In the park, Nick has translated sporting odds into a nursery rhyme – ‘Son of a gun is forty to one’ – and when Nick Jr. recounts this to Nora, the film suggests the difficulties of the coming narrative, of balancing the ‘son’ (Nick Jr.) with the ‘gun’ (the mystery plot). The opening scenes of the film have posited the education of the male child as the father’s responsibility, the child’s presence introducing issues of duty and obedience to a couple previously defined by their social freedom. Education, configured as play, becomes exclusively male, an exploration of the positive possibilities of disobedience, away from the protectiveness of the mother. The marriage (a defining pleasure of the series) becomes a function of ‘the family’, with the articulacy of the child stating his claim to the ongoing narrative. The growth of the child becomes a pressing concern, dictating the series’ diegetic progression.

### ***Tarzan Finds a Son!***

Again, a comparison with *Tarzan Finds a Son!* is instructive. As its title suggests, the film is about adoption, with Tarzan discovering the infant in a plane crash that has killed its natural parents. Basinger claims that Tarzan and Jane have the ‘perfect marriage’, but only because they are ‘not really married’,<sup>332</sup> by which she means not legitimised by society. Similarly, Gabe Essoe observes that

[...] since Tarzan and Jane weren’t legally married, they’d have to adopt a child or be open to a new wave of criticism from the Legion of Decency.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 321.

<sup>333</sup> Essoe, Gabe, *Tarzan of the Movies* (New York: Citadel Press, 1968), p. 107.

Nevertheless, one of the central premises of the Tarzan series is that the jungle, while mysterious and dangerous, functions as an ordered hierarchy.<sup>334</sup> The series' narratives consistently present the intrusion of Western civilisation, which misunderstands and threatens this jungle society, as a negative force. In *Tarzan finds a Son!*, insidious birth relatives of the child, hoping to benefit from an inheritance, convince Jane that the benefits of Western civilisation (education, wealth) outweigh those of the liberated spaces of the jungle. The film's conclusion depends upon Jane's plea of forgiveness acknowledging Tarzan's right to educate Boy, re-uniting the couple within a more patriarchal domestic model, but one that exists outside of the civilised world.<sup>335</sup>

Despite this, the film depicts the onset of domesticity by Westernising the jungle space. Tarzan learns responsibility when Jane feeds the baby before him. Having learnt his parental duties, he transforms their jungle treehouse into a nursery space, complete with crib and baby's rattle, all made from the materials at hand. This parodic version of the Western nursery, fashioned from bamboo and palm leaves, is an act of mimicry but also of transformation: a way for Tarzan to assert his identity as a parent within the domestic environment.

There is no equivalent in *Shadow of the Thin Man* – rather, the emphasis is all upon how Nick Jr. impedes his father. Later in the film, as the family sit down to dinner, the child instructs his father to 'drink milk!' Amused at this imposition (which, naturally enough, horrifies Nick, who has a cocktail right in front of him), Nora goads the child on. In order to please them both, Nick drains a glass of milk, though he gags at the lack of alcohol. The child infantilises his father, and there is a

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<sup>334</sup> This is often dramatised with stock footage that depicts predators hunting prey, a structured domain in which Tarzan is lord of the jungle.

<sup>335</sup> It was originally planned to end the film with Jane's death, leaving Tarzan with the sole responsibility of Boy's education. See Essoe, Gabe, *Tarzan of the Movies*, pp. 107-110.



degree of malevolence in Nick Jr.'s private smile. Leaving the room to discuss a murder, Nick surreptitiously brings his cocktail with him, associating the taking up of alcohol with the taking up of the case. This also means leaving Nick Jr. behind, the investigation of crime taking place in spaces unsuitable for a child. As the mystery element is introduced, Asta's role in the film increases.

Nick Jr. only has one further scene in the film, set aboard a merry-go-round. Again, we see the child asking his father to do something against his will, in this case, ride the merry-go-round as well. Nick Jr. wants to prove that his father is not a 'fraidy cat', as he has been labelled by a group of taunting children, all of whom are characterised as bratty and awful. Nick obliges, cutting a ridiculous figure on the carousel, which disorients him and blurs his vision. In another environment, these might be the effects of drunkenness. However, Nick's unpleasant dizziness confirms the implication of the 'drink milk' scene – that when Nick Jr. is around, Nick ends up feeling queasy, the presence of the child inhibiting the excessive and irresponsible freedoms that previously characterised the series. He backs away from the carousel, saying, 'Let's get away from that Mickey Finn.'

It is unsurprising, then, that the film keeps Nick Jr. offscreen for the majority of the film. Even more telling is the absence of the child from the film's conclusion, which ends with Nick kissing Nora in a public place and Asta hiding his eyes. The moment recalls the ending of *The Thin Man*, though the movement from the private space's promise of sexual activity to a public kiss reaffirms the film's project of placing the couple more centrally within society. There's no real reason for Asta to hide his eyes here, save for the self-conscious reference back to the earlier film, a reminder of past glories of a time before the (conspicuously absent) child.

### ***The Thin Man Goes Home* (without Nick Jr.)**

In many ways, *The Thin Man Goes Home* is the most atypical entry in the series, taking Nick and Nora out of their familiar urban milieu into small town America. One is struck by the resulting difference in tone, provoked by the film drawing on a quite different set of stereotypes and spaces than its predecessors. It seems likely that the new direction was prompted by changes behind the scenes: the film boasts a new director (Richard Thorpe), new producer (Everett Riskin) and new writing team (Robert Riskin and Dwight Taylor). As Thomas Schatz observes, an even more prominent change was narrowly avoided:

The most durable of MGM's screen couples was Nick and Nora Charles, and Myrna Loy's name was on the April 1942 agenda for "The Thin Man's Rival," her fifth appearance opposite William Powell. She had already been sent the script, and the committee set a start date for mid-June. But [Louis B.] Mayer and the others were due for a shock; Loy was tiring of the Nora Charles role and also was determined to do her part for the war effort. She refused the assignment and took an indefinite leave to work for the Red Cross. Loy was one star that Mayer and company had not anticipated having to replace, but they were not about to abandon the successful Thin Man series. In a meeting later that year, the minutes recorded "a lengthy discussion about 'The Thin Man' with regard to the replacement of Myrna Loy." The candidates included Marsha Hunt, Jean Arthur, and Loretta Young, but none proved satisfactory, so the series was suspended for the time being.<sup>336</sup>

It is unsurprising, then, that when work on the series recommenced, it was with a renewed interest in the role of Nora, and a firmer reference to America's involvement in the war. However, this is achieved not by having the central couple battling Nazis à la *The Falcon*, but through a consideration of the heartland of middle America, associating Nick and Nora with the homely values of a previous generation and reconstituting them within a socially useful patriarchy.

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<sup>336</sup> Schatz, Thomas, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Film-making in the Studio Era* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 363.

The plot has Nick taking Nora back to his parents' home town, Sycamore Springs. The introduction of a retrospective generation – Dr. Bertram Charles (Harry Davenport) and Martha Charles (Lucile Watson)<sup>337</sup> – is accompanied by the removal of the prospective. Nick Jr. is absent throughout the film and, by removing the narrative problem that dogged the previous two entries, *The Thin Man Goes Home* revitalises the series. One sequence stands out as particularly charming, and is instructive in the way that it reveals the film's strategies. Lounging in a hammock in his parents' front garden, dressed in a high-school sweater and reading a mystery magazine, Nick watches in amusement as Nora struggles to put up a deckchair. His half-hearted offer to assist is turned down by Nora: 'You might get all sweaty and die!' Eventually Nick obliges and Nora primly sits down on the deckchair, which collapses under her. Nick shakes with mirth behind his magazine, but Nora pulls on his hammock and he too ends up on the grass. The couple lie together in each other's arms, united in laughter, as Mrs. Charles watches over them and tuts fondly, 'Children!'

Earlier, Nora has explained Nick Jr.'s absence by saying they did not want to take him out of kindergarten, a throwaway line that imbues parental rectitude without the necessity of its performance. Without the narrative intrusion of a child, Nick and Nora are freed to be irresponsible; that is, to be children again. However, the question of responsibility is not avoided, but reconceptualised. We learn that Dr. Charles has always been disappointed by his son's playboy lifestyle, and that Nick has never convinced him otherwise. Throughout the film, Nora will make constant efforts to validate the son (Nick) in the eyes of his father, thus engineering a scene of parental

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<sup>337</sup> The casting of Davenport and Watson evokes the parents of MGM's Andy Hardy series, Judge Hardy (initially Lionel Barrymore, re-cast as Lewis Stone) and Mrs. Hardy (Spring Byington, re-cast as Fay Holden).

approval. Despite Nick's protests, Nora assures him, 'if your old man ever gave you a pat on the back, you'd pop your vest buttons all over the parlour rug'.

One of the ways that the film repositions Nick as worthy of this approval is through his project of self-reform. There are no scenes of excessive drinking in the movie – Nick stays on cider throughout, regardless of the disbelief of others. A running joke has Dr. Charles finding Nick in situations that seem dissolute (flat out under a table, staggering upstairs clutching an icepack) but are actually innocent (he has been trying to fix the table, he is returning home from being struck on the head). Similarly, the film frequently refers to Nick as a provider for his family, without the irony that has previously accompanied such dialogue: so, Nora attests that he is paid 'very large fees because his work is very important' and, more playfully, that he 'keeps us in dog biscuits'. Unlike previous entries in the series, the solution of the case is explicitly depicted as socially useful. Nick's exposure of the murderer ensures that Dr. Charles will add a specialist wing to the local hospital and that the top-secret plans for a new kind of propeller do not fall into the hands of a 'foreign power'.

The revisionist aspects of the screenplay (Nick has previously joked that he is of dubious ancestry in *Another Thin Man*) extend to the process of meeting suspects and investigating motives. As in other Thin Man films, these are all people that Nick knows, but they are distinguished by being characters from his childhood. There are no apartment buildings in Sycamore Springs, rather Nick encounters these characters across his parents' picket fence: the stern schoolmarm Miss Peavy (Nora Cecil), the local cop MacGregor (Donald MacBride) and the town's other doctor Bruce Clayworth (Lloyd Corrigan). Clayworth, who is revealed as the murderer at the film's conclusion, is Nick's old school friend and it emerges that his joshing recollections of boyhood competition are rooted in something far more sinister.

Clayworth represents the dark secrets that underlie the small town, though the film is at pains not to compromise the overall sanctity of home and domesticity. In the second half of this chapter, I will argue that this duality is depicted in a manner characteristic of the series, through the contrast of social space. Here, I wish to focus on the film's portrayal of the Charles home and explore how it ties together the Charles marriage's relation to conjugality and mystery.



Fig. 5 Small town spaces

In the previous chapter, I have suggested that Nick Jr.'s presence restructures the temporal progress of the series around the child's growth. In *The Thin Man Goes Home*, this progress is reformed around the couple, with Nick's return home coinciding with his own birthday. This results in the important spaces of the town being presented with regard to their personal significance to Nick. Chief among these is the Old Windmill, a location that Nick and Nora pass on their train journey into Sycamore Springs, and which Nick describes fondly as a boyhood haunt. Seeing a

painting of this location, Nora buys it for Nick's birthday and is disappointed when he dismisses it as the scene of bad childhood memories. Unbeknownst to Nora, the painting is sought after by various criminal elements in town, as it is actually an over-painting: beneath the oils are the secret propeller plans. This central prop, the key to the whole mystery, focuses our attention upon the *representation* of space (we never actually visit the Old Windmill) and what this representation might reveal about the town and its denizens.

Conversely, the most realised space in the town is the Charles house. Well-appointed (since everyone in the film seems to walk past at one time or another), reflecting the comfort and happiness of Dr. Charles and his wife, the home combines masculine and feminine spaces (laboratory and kitchen) in an ideal of domesticity. There is very little attention paid to what the house was once like – no childhood photographs of Nick, or similar – rather, it stands as an unambiguously benign location, and one that Nick and Nora occupy quite happily. The sole reference to Nick's youth is to the old woodshed, where Dr. Charles would discipline his wayward son with a razor strop. These reminiscences are always presented laughingly (there is no hint of resentment or trauma in Nick, for instance). However, this recollection of a space of discipline is important to the film's altered conception of responsibility and patriarchy in the Charles marriage.

Learning that Nora has misled a newspaper about their presence in Sycamore Springs (through an altruistic desire to impress Dr. Charles), Nick plays the stern husband. As Nora nervously asks how his day went, Nick enquires after the woodshed and razor strop, scene and implement of boyhood discipline. With Nora crying out, 'Oh no, Nick, not here in front of your parents!', he takes her over his knee and spansks her with the newspaper, the material proof of her disobedience.

Struggling to compose herself, Nora jokes, 'A fine son you've brought up. A wife beater!' Chuckling, Dr. Charles replies, 'I've wanted to do that to mother for forty years'. 'You wouldn't dare,' Mrs. Charles responds, not even looking up from her needlepoint.

The interest of the moment comes not from any diminishment of Nora, implied in Nochimson's judgement that Nora 'sentimentally immolates herself in the cause of Nick's bonding with dear old dad',<sup>338</sup> but in the quite extraordinary sexual imagery at work. One certainly feels that Nora's good intentions are being unjustly punished, and that the experience is humiliating, but the tone of the moment dissuades us from any sense of outrage. Rather, in following so closely the hammock scene described above, the spanking scene affirms a physical, and deeply sexual, bond that has been absent in the previous two films. That this scene takes place, rather perversely, in front of Nick's parents only adds to its thematic coherence. Love-play is depicted as transgressive, desirable (witness Dr. Charles' approving comment) and compatible with family.<sup>339</sup>

Equally important, the spanking scene observes an integral convention of the series: that the sexually suggestive interaction of the couple is directly linked to the progress of the mystery plot. The doorbell interrupts this convivial family moment, and Nick answers the door to Peter Burton (Ralph Brooks) who, on asking for Nick's help, is shot where he stands. The corpse collapses through the doorway, as though

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<sup>338</sup> Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry: the Power of 2* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 100.

<sup>339</sup> Grimm notes the 'true sexual nature' of the scene and the assignation of power to Mrs. Charles. Grimm, Courtney A., *The Arranged Marriage of William Powell and Myrna Loy: How Nick and Nora Didn't Solve the Marriage Problem* (unpublished thesis: Ohio University, 2008), p. 92. <<http://etd.ohiolink.edu/view.cgi/Grimm%20Courtney.pdf?ohiou1226613637>>, accessed 3 August 2011.

conjured by the release of sexual play. (In the second half of this chapter, I discuss in further detail the significance of the space of the doorway.)

The intrusion of criminality into the domestic dramatises Dr. Charles' growing appreciation of his son's talents. This is not effected without complaint – a memorable composition shows us Clayworth examining Burton's body in a laboratory setting (that we first take to be a mortuary), with the camera panning left to reveal the Charles' living room adjacent and Dr. Charles grumbling about the presence of a corpse in his workspace. The eventual acceptance of his son's profession is delayed until the film's concluding scene, a resolution accompanying the exposure of Clayworth as the murderer.

With the cast of suspects gathered in Dr. Charles' laboratory, Nick catches Clayworth in a lie by virtue of his knowledge of anatomy. As Nick describes the progress of a bullet through Burton's body with forensic accuracy, an insert shows us his father smiling appreciatively, and Nora surveying this development with approval. With Clayworth hauled off by the police, Dr. Charles steps forward to congratulate his son. Nick's progress from black sheep to prodigal son might be described as the move from a spank to a pat, using an imagery of connection more in keeping with *Tarzan Finds a Son!* than *Shadow of the Thin Man*. As the beaming Dr. Charles pats his son's shoulder, Nick's chest swells, his vest buttons popping in fulfilment of Nora's prophecy. The final shot shows us Nick flanked by his proud father and wife - the absence of Mrs. Charles emphasising the film's correlation of achievement, responsibility and patriarchy.



### **Nick Jr. and *Song of the Thin Man***

In an article accompanying the release of *Song of the Thin Man*, K. Chester Sherburne muses, ‘Will that growing lad, Nick Charles, junior, follow in father’s footsteps?’<sup>340</sup> It is a question that cuts to the heart of the film’s uncertainty over the child’s role in the ongoing series. I have suggested that *Song of the Thin Man* can be viewed as a regression, taking Nick and Nora back into an urban milieu and re-engaging with the narrative problems presented by Nick Jr. (now played by an eleven-year-old Dean Stockwell). In the second half of this chapter, I argue that the film’s difficulty over presenting Nick and Nora in 1947 results in an incoherent depiction of social space and that Nick Jr.’s domestic confinement reveals the series’ increasing anxiety over the space of home.

The film begins aboard a gambling boat, deferring consideration of the familial by beginning in an exclusively adult space. While *Shadow of the Thin Man* opened with Nick and his son in a public park, and *The Thin Man Goes Home* progresses from Grand Central Station to the family homestead, *Song of the Thin Man*’s first shot emphasises separation, depicting a shot of the boat floating outside city limits, as a female voice sings ‘You’re Not So Easy to Forget’. Memory is at issue throughout the film, the solution of the murder being dependent upon an amnesiac jazz musician, and present too in this opening sequence’s revival of somewhat tired tropes. As two lovably thuggish bouncers pass between the sophisticates at the gaming tables, they stop to admire the back view of one particular woman, this pleasing spectacle drawing from one of the goons the complimentary exclamation, ‘Yoo-hoo!’ The object of their attentions is, of course, Nora – and as the

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<sup>340</sup> Sherburne, K. Chester, ‘At Home with Nick and Nora’, *Film Reel* (November 1947), p. 13.

star couple turn to the bouncers, Nick corrects them: ‘In polite society, we don’t say “yoo-hoo”, we say “yoo-whom”’.

The moment finds Nick in typically instructional mode, entirely familiar with the urban demotic. However, it is notable that, while previously amiable criminals have only known Nick and have often assumed Nora to be his mistress, here the bouncers know husband *and* wife, and that the conversation immediately turns to Nick Jr. Nick informs the bouncers that, ‘Mrs. Charles thinks we should cultivate some people who haven’t served time. She wants to create a proper atmosphere for Nicky Jr.’ As in *Another Thin Man*, some attempt is made to associate Nick Jr. with the world of criminality (we learn that the bouncers have been teaching ‘the little squirt’ how to crack safes), but this is less important than the moment’s opposition of the spaces of mystery and Nick Jr. at home. Left alone to collect their winnings at the roulette table, husband and wife share the following exchange:

*Nick:* Let’s go home.

*Nora:* What’s at home?

*Nick:* You, my pipe, my slippers.

*Nora:* Nicky, I think you’re slipping.

*Nick:* Darling, give me my pipe, my slippers and a beautiful woman.  
And you can have my pipe and slippers.

*Nora:* That’s sweet. But we’re staying here.

Unlike *Shadow of the Thin Man*, which associates the child with domesticity then leaves him behind, *Song of the Thin Man* frames the problem differently. By first showing us Nick and Nora at play, with the question of domesticity hanging over them, the film establishes Nick Jr. as a troublesome impingement upon the series’ pleasures.

## **Domestic routine**

Throughout the film, Nick and Nora's crime-solving is associated with an unconventional approach to time. This is partly dictated by their investigation of the jazz world, but also asserts the unconventionality of their domestic arrangement. This has been the case in previous films as well, but none of these have featured an articulate son who complains at his parents' absence. Nick Jr. only appears in the film at breakfast and bedtime, scheduled moments of parental duty. In each instance, the child is associated with fictional representations of crime - a daily newspaper strip, a bedtime story - domesticated expressions of interest in his parents' preoccupations. Nick Jr. also serves a more developed thematic function, foreshadowing his parents' distance from the exuberant jazz world, establishing an opposition between fun (baseball) and discipline (piano practice), and tentatively broaching the question of their achievements and suitability as parents.

Domestic routine as a way of ordering time runs contrary to the progress of a criminal investigation, which has an alternative routine of recycling and reworking familiar series tropes and pleasures. More than any previous entry in the series, this film is aware of the increasing age of its leading couple, something of a problem for its continuation. Nick Jr.'s growth reminds us of this, and his ability to place demands upon his parents more advanced than 'drink milk' calls for a more rigorous delineation of what the family's domestic life entails. The film fails to provide this, and its corresponding nervousness over Nick and Nora's place in the post-war city leads to an incoherence from which the series cannot recover. During their investigation in this film, Nick and Nora are repeatedly viewed as out of date and out of place. With Nick Jr. confined to the home, the question then becomes, where do Nick and Nora belong?

In 'Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham', Robert Warshow contrasts the innocence of his child with his gruesome reading matter. Ultimately, Warshow concludes that 'children must take their chances like the rest of us',<sup>341</sup> and it is on this note of acceptance that I begin my discussion of Nick Jr. His introductory scene, at the family breakfast table, asserts a youthful relish in the adult world of sex and death, but assures us of his distance (and protection) from it. The family maid Bertha (Connie Gilchrist) embodies this gap between domestic life and the world of murder as she picks the morning newspaper up from the doormat. Ignoring the front page story about a murder, she checks the weather report and sighs, 'Rain again'. Quite unlike Stella from *Shadow of the Thin Man*, Bertha (small, mousy and white) asserts the home as antipodal to matters criminal. While Stella had represented Nick Jr.'s protection from the outside world, Bertha displays ignorance of the workings of that world.

The moment is superficially similar to an early scene in *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949, MGM) in which a maid leaves a newspaper on a breakfast tray, and its headline becomes the subject of conversation between the married Hepburn and Tracy characters as they prepare to leave for work. It is significant that here Nick and Nora leisurely take their breakfast, with nowhere to go, and that it is Nick Jr. who eagerly exclaims, 'Oh boy, a murder!' He does not linger over this reportage, however, turning instead to the detective serial in the funny pages. Nick Jr.'s thrills are regulated and timetabled: Nora insists upon 'cornflakes before comics', on piano practice before baseball, and bans him from listening to radio for a week when he is disobedient. Crime, where it does impinge upon Nick Jr.'s life, is an opportunity for

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<sup>341</sup> Warshow, Robert, 'Paul, the Horror Comics, and Dr. Wertham', Rosenberg, Bernard and Manning White, David (eds.), *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), p. 210.



administer a spanking raises the question of gendered responsibility. 'I'm his mother, you're his father,' says Nora, reminding him of his duty.

There is an equivalent scene in *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948, Universal), in which young cop Jimmy Halloran (Don Taylor) is instructed by his wife (Anne Sargent) to whip their boy for running across a busy thoroughfare. Halloran's reluctance, and his avoidance of this chore, is directly related to his closeness to the urban environment. He escapes having to punish the child by being called out on duty again, and he later jokes to a colleague about his wife's bad temper. Halloran's position is validated, one feels, because he is proud of his son's intrepidity and growing mastery of a city that holds dangers, even if they are limited to the traffic in Washington Heights. On the contrary, paraphrasing Warshow, Nick Jr. is punished for wanting to go outside and 'take his chances'.

I have suggested, in my discussion of *The Thin Man Goes Home*, that the act of spanking Nora positions Nick as patriarch without losing the series' interest in sexual play. In *Song of the Thin Man*, Nick's initial reluctance to punish his son gives way to an enthusiastic whaling as his disciplinarian side takes over. The scene plays out as follows: Nick takes his son over his knee, apologetically saying, 'I regret that I'm going to have to take a certain corrective action'. As he does so, from Nick's perspective we see a series of short flashbacks projected onto the child's rump: Nick handing out cigars at the child's birth; Nick comforting Nora as she receives a lock of the child's hair from a barber; and finally, Nick riding a tricycle into a bush and being laughed at by his son. The first two fond memories give Nick pause, but he wilts under Nora's stern eye – the memory of unsuccessful instruction and the child's hearty amusement at his misfortune snaps Nick out of his reverie, and he applies the

rolled newspaper with gusto. The spanking is administered as a result of an offence to Nick's patriarchal position.

While the scene aboard the gambling boat has used memory to evoke the series' familiar conventions, it is striking that these recollections of Nick Jr. are unfamiliar to us (they do not come from previous films). In this sense, the representation of significant moments in the history of father and son only emphasises our lack of commitment to that history. One is also struck by the unusual use of flashback (never employed to explain mysteries in the *Thin Man* series), and its vulgar deployment (a child's behind as something like a crystal ball). Where the first film in the series, *The Thin Man*, used the cinematic apparatus to draw attention to the processes of a mystery narrative, by this last film that visual apparatus is at the service of indulgent visual effects recalling a meaningless past. At this stage in the series, the medium of narrative, of mystery headlines and mystery comic strips – the newspaper – is only fit to smack a wayward child's bottom.

### **Bedtime stories**

There is a scene later in the film that comes perilously close to characterising Nick and Nora as bad parents. After a tour of various after-hours jazz joints, the couple return home to find their apartment ransacked. Nora rushes to their son's bedroom and is relieved to find him asleep. As Nick and Nora get into their own beds, their sleepy son enters, complaining, 'I hardly ever get to see you. Look at what time it is...'

By having the previously chastised son telling off his parents, the moment dodges the somewhat troubling sub-text of neglect. This is not to say that the film is unaware of this problem, but that it suppresses it for the time being. Nick piggy-

backs his son back to bed, and settles down to tell him a bedtime story. There is a nice gag here about the detective's role as storyteller, as Nick Jr. tells his father, 'Your stories always put me sleep'. Starting into a story about the outlaw 'Dangerous Dan McGoop' (a name that evokes the Western rather than the crime story), Nick notices his son's pop-gun. Describing it as an antique, Nick has a brainwave about the case he's investigating and rushes out, without delivering the promised bedtime story. Two points seem relevant: (1) that once again, Nick Jr. is allowed only limited access to the world of crime ('cornflakes before comics'), stimulating the mystery narrative but denied involvement; and (2) that the imagery of the playroom, toy cars and sailboats, and a toy gun, pushes Nick and Nora out of the home once more into an engagement with their real world manifestations (driving through the night to interview someone about a gun used in a killing on a boat). It is telling that the moment also permits Nick Jr. no commentary on the movement from fictionality to reality, as he did in the 'son of a gun is forty to one' scene in *Shadow of the Thin Man*.<sup>342</sup>

### **'No one'd hurt a little boy...'**

It is a pleasing co-incidence that the actor who plays the young cop of *The Naked City* is also the amnesiac jazzman in *Song of the Thin Man*.<sup>343</sup> Don Taylor portrays Buddy Hollis, the lovesick and dissipated clarinet man. In the first scene

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<sup>342</sup> It seems likely that a scene depicting Nick Jr. more closely allied with criminality was removed from an early draft of the script at the insistence of the PCA: 'Most important of these unacceptable items is the suggestion that an eight year old boy is shown being taught how to crack a safe, and has also become an expert pickpocket. Such a portrayal is, we believe, in violation of the Code requirements concerning the treatment of children and crime on the screen. Furthermore, the fact that it is treated lightly and for comedy, we believe, adds immensely to its offensiveness to audiences generally. We believe, therefore, that this element in your story will have to be changed entirely.' Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 24 September 1946. MPAA files for *Song of the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>343</sup> Don Taylor's leading role in *The Naked City* immediately followed his appearance in *Song of the Thin Man*, which suggests (as with Ruth Hussey) that a supporting role in this series was a good way to become noticed.



aboard the gambling boat S. S. Fortune, Hollis goes into a solo that turns into a series of discordant notes, prompting a fellow band member to mutter, 'That reedman is really whacked up tonight'. In line with the Hollywood convention that a 'player's inability to hit the right notes is a metaphor for his sexual or masculine inadequacy',<sup>344</sup> Hollis' fractured performance signals his own regression to a child-like state. This allows the film to address questions of youth and failure in a manner that would be inappropriate with regard to Nick Jr. Nevertheless, the comparison is there to be made, confusing and troubling as it may be.

In contrast to Nick Jr., Hollis is defined in his first scene by inarticulacy, evident in his inability to struggle through a song that he has written (the aforementioned 'You're Not So Easy to Forget'). In a location characterised by its distance from the city, Hollis is similarly distanced from his band mates, standing before them, isolated in a spotlight. As the case progresses, Hollis disappears, so that Nora will at one point exclaim, 'I don't believe there is any such person as Buddy Hollis'. The detective couple eventually find him in the Valley Rest Home, a sanatorium in Poughkeepsie.

Clothed in a dressing gown and confined to his room, Hollis practises his self-penned tune obsessively, attempting to recover his identity. The comparison with Nick Jr. (confined to the domestic space, unwilling to practice the piano) is clear, made stronger by Hollis' relationship to Nora. While Nick Jr. has been associated with his mischievous father over his disciplinarian mother, Hollis awakens the maternal in Nora. Sneaking back to the sanatorium without Nick's knowledge, Nora attempts to coax Hollis' recollection of the murder. She tries to get him to tell his story, and she does this by asking him to play his clarinet. However, this is maternal

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<sup>344</sup> Gabbard, Krin, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 147.

care with a motive: while Nora is concerned for Hollis, she wants to pump him for information. It is important that she fails, that Hollis turns on her, and that it is only the timely intervention of Nick that saves Nora from being attacked.

It is perhaps too much to argue that Hollis represents the male child's resentment of his mother. However, her concern for Hollis is directly followed by the series' most sustained threat to Nick Jr.'s well being. Ringing her son from Poughkeepsie, Nora apologises, 'I'm afraid we won't be able to have dinner with you again'. The abrupt ending to the phone call convinces Nora that Nick Jr. is in danger, and the couple hurry back to their apartment. The sequence of their journey is tortuous, as Nora becomes more and more convinced that their absence has endangered their son. Arriving home, Nora hysterically reprimands Bertha the maid, taking no comfort from Nick's assurance that the police are 'tearing up the town' looking for their boy. Coming so soon after the psychoanalytic jargon of the sanatorium director (Hollis has a 'deep-rooted guilt fixation'), Nora's hysteria releases the film's own deep-rooted fixation over the child's place within the series, making home the site of anxiety.

Of course, a policeman delivers Nick Jr. home safely, and his delighted greeting ('I've been pinched!') indicates one important difference between the child and Hollis. While Nick Jr. is continually associated with health and vitality (manifest in Stockwell's performance, but also in his costuming of check shirt and blue jeans), Hollis' mental illness suggests not just the dissipated life of the jazzman – youthful vigour spent through association with the world of night – but also the imagery of the maimed veteran. In the second half of this chapter, I will suggest that the film mobilises the themes (if not the production values) of post-war *noir* to depict the spaces of mystery. Here, it is enough to note that Buddy is a figure of 'damaged

youth', an association strengthened by Taylor's boyish features and his dressing gown, offering a way for the film to problematise the younger generation without directly involving Nick Jr..

In the penultimate scene of the film, Nick puts Hollis back on stage, asking him to perform his tune and then to name the murderer. Still unwell, Hollis fails to complete either task, recalling Nick's interrupted bedtime story. Unlike *Shadow of the Thin Man*, the last film in the series ends with Nick and Nora returning home to their child. There is a presentiment of the conclusion to the series, as Nick, preparing for bed, puns, 'Now Nick Charles is going to retire'. The couple look in on their sleeping son, and the film's final shot repeats a running gag that has Asta creeping from his basket into bed with Nick Jr. It is an odd image, failing to assert 'the family together' or even the union of the couple.<sup>345</sup> In a set of films that has privileged sexual play, this final image of two bodies in bed is entirely sexless. Save for a superficial cuteness, the intention of the moment is mystifying: a curiously limp and cosy conclusion to a once challenging series.

### Three mysteries

As my chronological discussion of the series has shown, while repeated dialogue and situations are crucial to audience pleasure, these tropes run the risk of seeming tired and lifeless. With each subsequent entry, the pressure to find innovation within convention became more pressing, as this recollection from Nat Perrin illustrates:

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<sup>345</sup> Again, advice from the PCA led the original final scene to be rewritten: 'At the finish of the picture it is our considered opinion that as presently described, the business of Nick giving Nora "a long hard kiss" situated as they are in the aisle between their twin beds, and Nora's reaction to the kiss, are definitely offensively sex suggestive and could not be approved.' Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 4 December 1946. MPAA files for *Song of the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

Another time they came to me and said, “We need a *Thin Man*.” That’s when I became a producer, for *Song of the Thin Man*. And I thought, what could we do with *The Thin Man* this time? And at that time jive talk, the bebop era, had just started. And I had an idea to use that background. And I consulted a man, Harry the Hipster, who played piano in a Vine Street joint. Keenan Wynn and Peter Lawford<sup>346</sup> were going to be in the picture, and they were excited about doing something with that background – you know, crazy jazz musicians with their weird idiom. And I remember the evening they called and said, “We want to bring Harry the Hipster over.” And they brought him over and he finished a whole bottle of brandy while playing some crazy songs on the piano. The point is, that was the first thing I thought of, the background, and then you develop the line of your story.<sup>347</sup>

The presence or absence of Nick Jr. affects the progress of the mystery narratives. In the remainder of my account of the Thin Man series, I argue that this affects the social worlds depicted in the mystery investigations. My discussion focuses on (1) the narrative role of Nora; (2) the question of tone; and (3) concessions made to the memory of previous entries in the series. By focusing on these elements, I hope to show that each of these three films attends to the problem of continuation and subsequence in different ways.

### ***Shadow of the Thin Man: spaces of mystery***

In thinking about the spaces of mystery in the last three Thin Man films, I am struck by an immediate difference to the films discussed in chapter 1. While the first three films posited greed within the family as a consistent motive, these movies (in response to Nick and Nora’s altered social status) broaden their horizons. In *Shadow of the Thin Man*, Major Sculley (Henry O’Neill) seeks to perpetuate his association with a national gambling syndicate; in *The Thin Man Goes Home*, the investigation of small town politics reveals that Dr. Clayworth is selling secrets to a foreign power;

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<sup>346</sup> Peter Lawford does not appear in the film as released.

<sup>347</sup> Server, Lee, *Screenwriter: Words Become Pictures* (Pittstown, New Jersey: Main Street Press, 1987), p. 147.

and in *Song of the Thin Man*, Mitchell Talbin (Leon Ames) kills a band leader conducting an affair with his wife. In each case, the motive is positioned outside of Nick and Nora's experience (organised crime, international politics, jazz subculture), contributing to the stratification of domesticity and mystery detailed above.

There is a running joke in *Shadow of the Thin Man* about the unsophisticated spaces in which this case is set. In a series of quotidian environments, working-class characters continually accost Nora and judge her wide-brimmed hat (adorned with a feather) to be 'screwy'. Eventually, in frustration, she leaves it with a janitor. Nora's inappropriate headgear allows the film to question what role she now plays in the series. The point being made, surely, is that in previous films, this hat would have been entirely appropriate. But in the cheap seats at a wrestling bout, it rather stands out.

I noted, in relation to *Another Thin Man*, a tendency to dissociate Nora from other female characters. This continues in all three of the films discussed here: thus, while Nora is acquainted with the young couples in *Shadow of the Thin Man* and *Song of the Thin Man*, the level of intercourse is kept vague and perfunctory. Rather disappointingly, Nora has no scenes with the snooty Claire Porter (Stella Adler), a high-class dame who attempts to charm Nick and, in failing, sneers, 'That's what I deserve for letting a double-crossing cop in the door'. However, Nora's diminished involvement with criminal investigation does not pass without remark. When Nick tells her, 'You go home, cold cream that lovely face, slip into an exciting negligee – and I'll see you at breakfast,' Nora disobeys him and follows him to a crime scene. Discovered when she falls over in the dark, Nora pouts, 'I was just trying to show you, you can't neglect me.' 'I might have shot you,' says Nick, and Nora's reply is significant: 'Even that's better than staying home alone'.

Accompanying this shift in Nora's agency is a lessened interest in the future of young couples. Paul (Barry Nelson) and Molly (Donna Reed) in *Shadow of the Thin Man* are exemplary, a couple committed to uncovering a crime but in a rather uninteresting way. It is surely to their discredit that when discussing the case in a bar, Paul and Molly order tea, and that when Paul leaves to break into an office, Molly wails, 'Wait, wait, Paul, you mustn't! I'm afraid!' Where once the series had attested to the joys of solving crimes as a couple, this heterosexual pair seem drained of vitality, as though the films are beginning to doubt the validity of bringing domesticity and mystery together.

In keeping with the film's interest in public spaces, the exposure of the murderer comes not in an apartment building, as in previous *Thin Man* films, but in the office of Lt. Abrams (Sam Levene). When Major Sculley is accused and snatches Nick's gun, Nora steps into the line of fire to protect her husband. Her undoubted bravery is somewhat compromised when Nick reveals that he removed the bullets from the pistol three years ago 'when Nicky was cutting his teeth on it'. It's a problem that *Shadow of the Thin Man* leaves unresolved: the contradiction between Nora as a mother and her ability to contribute to crime-solving.

One motif that remains unchanged, however, is the close relationship between crime and private and public spaces. I close with a consideration of composition, similar to that trail of visual clues (MacCauley's black umbrella, the shadow of bars across his face) laid in *The Thin Man*. In *Shadow of the Thin Man*, Van Dyke similarly anticipates Major Sculley's guilt. Late in the film, Sculley leads Nick and Abrams to the rooming house of an informant. At this point, we do not know that Sculley has killed the informant earlier in the day. However, on opening the door to the room, and seeing the ominous shadow of a hanging man, Sculley remains at the

doorway. Van Dyke frames the moment so that we do not see Sculley's expression, but note his fixed position as the others lift the hanging corpse down. The case will hinge upon a question of spatial familiarity: Sculley knew to take them to the room with the corpse, despite the fact that the informant had only moved there earlier that day.<sup>348</sup> Understanding the space of crime is what trips up the murderer – a plot detail that is carried over into *The Thin Man Goes Home*, but with a somewhat different emphasis.



Fig. 6 The doorway

### ***The Thin Man Goes Home: spaces of mystery***

As I have noted, there are no apartment buildings, nightclubs, racetracks or private berths in *The Thin Man Goes Home*: rather, the action unfolds in baggage cars,

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<sup>348</sup> The importance of the moment is demonstrated by the fact that Van Dyke ignored the PCA recommendation that '[c]are will be needed with this shadow of the hanging man, to keep it down to merely a flash, as it is the type of scene which censor boards regularly delete'. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 11 June 1941. MPAA files for *Shadow of the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

front gardens and auto courts. Accompanying this shift is an explicit statement of the national situation – thus, Nick and Nora endure a crowded train ride with the philosophical words, ‘C’est la guerre’. The cod sophistication of that line is at odds with their circumstances, which rapidly become worse when the ticket collector tells them they must travel with Asta in the baggage car. Travelling the length of the train is no easy business, as they squeeze through packed, sweaty corridors. Eventually, Nora clears the way by pretending that the bundle under her coat (Asta) is her baby. With an eye to the problems of the previous two films, the moment asserts that masquerading as a mother is so much more convenient than being one.

As they pass through the carriages, Nora remarks on each being labelled after distinctive place names. ‘How far is that baggage car anyway?’ she complains, and Nick jokes, ‘Oh, I imagine it’s somewhere between Pocahontas and Sitting Bull’. When they do arrive, the couple sit amongst straw and livestock as the rural scenery flashes by through the open loading door. Pushing through crowds has brought them to a spot where they are rewarded with a different view of the American landscape, one that acknowledges its history as a wilderness. As mentioned in my discussion of the Old Windmill painting, one of the dominant themes of the film is the representation of small towns, spaces described by Thomas as ‘the descendants of the western’s settlements – versions of what places like Tombstone go on to become – once they have been well and truly brought within the rule of law’.<sup>349</sup>

Writing of the small town melodrama, Thomas goes on to position it as ‘a place where the lawlessness of the old West has been suppressed and the technological violence of the modern city has not yet developed’.<sup>350</sup> This is an especially useful formulation with regard to *The Thin Man Goes Home*. Nick and

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<sup>349</sup> Thomas, Deborah, *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film* (London: Wallflower, 2001), p. 39.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.



Nora are viewed with suspicion as city types throughout, with their manner and language standing out amongst the locals. As Nick's investigation threatens to expose a number of embarrassing scandals, the bank manager Tatum (Charles Halton) warns Dr. Charles, 'He's upsetting the town. It might be better if you asked him to leave.'

Naively, Mrs. Charles assures Nora that there's no crime in Sycamore Springs, in contrast to the stern Miss Peavy who instructs Nick to 'root out the evil in Sycamore Springs'. In exposing the town's dark secrets and purging it of its criminal elements, Nick and Nora reinvigorate the environment, demonstrated through their introduction of urban slang. One of the ways that we see Dr. Charles warming to his son is through unconscious adoption of his mode of speech. He storms out of the bank manager's office calling him 'a stinker!', to which the matronly Mrs. Charles later adds, 'Tatum is a two-timing, double-crossing rat.'

Given Robert Riskin's involvement with the screenplay, it is unsurprising that *The Thin Man Goes Home* depicts the divergence between small town and city language.<sup>351</sup> Local antiques dealer Willie Crump (Donald Meek), who constantly uses the phrase 'higgledy-piggledy', is baffled by Nick's modern terminology. Indeed, Crump's resistance, presented to us as charming eccentricity, is what the film proposes as the worth of the small town – something that counteracts the fixation upon scandal. The prolific Meek's performance presents these qualities as benign: one thinks of his history of playing similarly whimsical characters such as Mr. Poppins in *You Can't Take It With You* (Frank Capra, 1938, Columbia) and Peacock in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939, Walter Wanger Productions). Rather 'higgledy-piggledy' himself, I will argue that Willie Crump plays an important part in the film's final scene.

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<sup>351</sup> Riskin's filmography includes *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Frank Capra, 1936, Columbia), in which the provincial term 'pixilated' baffles a city courtroom.

The setting of the small town allows the film to draw upon character types different to those we have become accustomed to in this series. Nevertheless, it is useful to note the ways in which these characters build upon established Thin Man types. From this perspective, Miss Peavy might be seen to be an equivalent to the Jessie Ralph character in *After the Thin Man*: the disagreeable older woman who frowns upon pleasure of any kind. In *The Thin Man Goes Home*, Miss Peavy is contrasted with Mrs. Charles, both examples of an older female generation but quite different in temperament. Of course, Miss Peavy is also a spiritual descendent of the ladies of the Law and Order League, who hound undesirables out of the Western town in *Stagecoach*. It is not surprising, then, to find that Nora Cecil played the disapproving landlady of Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell) in that film, of whom Boone ironically asks, ‘Is this the face that wrecked a thousand ships?’

The film’s young female, Laura Belle (Gloria De Haven), offers perhaps the clearest indication of *The Thin Man Goes Home*’s unusual tonal qualities. Like the Donna Reed character in *Shadow of the Thin Man*, Laura Belle is part of a couple in which the film shows little interest; however, where Reed’s Molly was played entirely straight, Laura Belle is a figure of gentle mockery throughout. A guileless aspiring actress, Laura Belle’s adolescent faith in emotional earnestness makes her sweet, but little else. When Nick interrogates her, the transparency of her lies make her quite different to the sophisticated Claire Porter in *Shadow of the Thin Man*, a woman of experience. This has an effect upon our reading of the protagonist too – while it is believable and expected that Powell should sustain a pretence of sexual interest throughout his scene with Stella Adler, to do so with Gloria De Haven would be unthinkable.

It is around the character of Crazy Mary (Ann Revere) that many of the film's concerns coalesce. Initially presented as another comic figure, it is gradually revealed that Crazy Mary is the mother of the murdered man, and that she holds the key to the mystery. Indeed, Crazy Mary embodies the town's suppressed dirty linen (once an unwed mother, forced to give her child up for adoption in the city), living in a shack on the outskirts of town, spatially excluded from the town's presentation of itself. I have suggested that the Old Windmill, a site we never visit, signifies an interest in the town's representation – and another location that is only talked about is the factory, also unseen and the source of the stolen plans. It is important, then, that we do see Crazy Mary's shack, the film's only example of social deprivation, evident in her raggedy clothing and her squalid living conditions. If Sycamore Springs represents a taming of the West, Crazy Mary stands as its lingering memory – a frontier woman out of her time, wielding a carbine rifle. This site of repression unlocks the mystery at the film's conclusion.

This tragic mother is, perhaps unsurprisingly, kept far away from Nora. While *Another Thin Man* and *Shadow of the Thin Man* have struggled to find ways to employ Nora, *The Thin Man Goes Home* makes a virtue of Loy's skills as a comic performer. This is most apparent during the sequence of Nora following Brogan (Edward Brophy) through the town at night. As usual, Nora is on a fool's errand – Brogan is leading her out of harm's way on Nick's instruction – and as usual, she happens upon a useful clue. The scene goes to pains to contrast the sleepy town to the dangerous and exciting night-time city. As Nora follows Brogan down Main Street, its raised walkways recall the archetypal Western town. Stopping at the window of a barber's, Nora's glamorous visage stirs up the male patrons, one of whom assumes she is with the visiting burlesque show. She ends up in a poolroom (the kind of place

with a sign reading Please Do Not Spit on the Floor), where the bartender refuses to serve her for being ‘an unescorted female’. Nora objects to this old-fashioned ruling and throughout the sequence, she is presented as intelligent, resourceful and, perhaps even more importantly, funny. With characteristic ingenuity, she summons the police by engineering a carnivalesque bar-room brawl, demonstrating her autonomy within masculine space.

In my earlier discussion of this film, I have suggested that a doorway is a significant space for a corpse to fall through: it marks the division of private space and community, and their point of connection. This rubs both ways: while the Charles house welcomes visitors (uninvited, Brogan sits down to a hearty meal), Crazy Mary shuns company, threatening any visitors with her rifle. If, as I have suggested, the movement of characters between private and public spaces is a defining trait of the *Thin Man* series, it is interesting to compare the ways this movement is portrayed in successive films. In *Shadow of the Thin Man*, Sculley’s knowledge that the informant had swapped rooms gave him away as the murderer, the pay-off of the mystery. In *The Thin Man Goes Home*, however, the same plot point is a matter of light comedy: Nick changes door numbers at an auto court to make mischief for the local police. Even so, the plot of the later film still hinges on a murderer’s relation to private space. When Dr. Clayworth enters Crazy Mary’s shack without hesitation, he gives away that he has murdered her. Ultimately, Clayworth is caught in a lie about where he was when Peter Burton was shot. His housekeeper confirms that he was at home upstairs, his place within the domestic space confirming that he shot down from his window.

I am aware that my description of Sycamore Springs threatens to misrepresent the film’s fondness for the small town space, and in this last paragraph I redress that

by comparing three firearms. The first is Crazy Mary's old carbine, a gun that does not fire. Like her, it is outdated, cannot be reintegrated into the small town society, and so becomes the instrument of her death (Clayworth uses it to cave her head in). The second is the Japanese sniper rifle that Clayworth uses to kill Peter Burton. Like its user, it is duplicitous (leaving a wound that looks like a shot from a .45) and associates Clayworth with an unthinkable future, the victory of a feared and hated foreign power. The last gun is the most interesting of all: the old flintlock that Willie Crump carries with him. Like the wizened antique dealer, it is archaic and ridiculous. However, it *does* fire, (and this is the important thing) without hurting anyone. Despite being defined by its past, the small town and its eccentric denizens are validated in this moment. The American settlement persists and, if it should be enlivened by city folk like Nick and Nora, then so much the better.

### ***Song of the Thin Man: a loss of tempo***

*Nick:* I have to give her one whirl around the floor to keep the franchise.

In a paean to the New York of his youth entitled 'The Lost City', F. Scott Fitzgerald mourns the loss of 'whispers of fantastic success and eternal youth'.<sup>352</sup> In a spirit of bittersweet nostalgia, the writer accepts that, as he has aged, so too the city has changed from a space of 'persistent idealism'<sup>353</sup> to something 'bloated, gutted'.<sup>354</sup> Familiar, yet quite different, he describes his unease at 'the sense that I have been there before'<sup>355</sup> but that its precious symbolism has passed. Concluding with a consideration of the Empire State Building, Fitzgerald writes,

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<sup>352</sup> Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Crack-Up with other pieces and stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 31.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Full of vaunting pride the New Yorker had climbed here and seen with dismay what he had never suspected, that the city was not the endless succession of canyons that he had supposed but that it had limits – from the tallest structure he saw for the first time that it had faded out into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless.<sup>356</sup>

In this concluding section on the Thin Man series, I suggest that *Song of the Thin Man* suffers a similar nostalgia, albeit one that, unlike Fitzgerald, it struggles to articulate.

In returning to the space of the city, the series discovers its limits.



Fig 7. The distant city

I have noted a certain perfunctory aspect to the film's opening scene. What seems most striking, however, is its disconnection from the space of the city. As the camera moves through the croupiers and gamblers in evening dress aboard the S. S. Fortune, we observe a spectacle and performance of wealth that might take place in any nightclub, ending with a composition that takes in the bandstand and dancefloor.

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

We now cut to a medium shot of Fran Paige (Gloria Grahame) singing. On the soundtrack, Fran's voice has linked the first three shots of the film, the last of which places her as the focal point of the room. Fran's stage costume, a shiny evening dress that emphasises her figure and especially the points of her breasts, reflects the spotlight, drawing attention not just to the performance of female sexuality but also to its visibility.<sup>357</sup> At the bottom left of the frame, at the edge of the stage, an elderly gentleman ignores his dining companion and looks up at Fran, puffing at a phallic cigar. Behind her, we see the city in the distance, emphasising our distance from that space.

Fresh from playing Violet Bick in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947) and the dissolute Ginny in *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947, RKO), Grahame's persona had formed around feminine vulnerability and sexual availability. In both of the aforementioned films, these qualities are associated with the enticing yet corrupt *noir* city of night. As Fran's performance draws to a close and she glides back into the orchestra on a moving stage, a tight close-up moves back with her, as though entranced. Yet, despite this star moment, Fran has only two more scenes and is murdered early on. Accompanying this is a continuation of a trend noted in the previous two films in the series – a young couple (Jayne Meadows and Bruce Cowling) who are vapid and undeveloped. Thus, Grahame's striking performance begins the film with a post-war femininity based on the sexualised body, which is rejected through her death, but to which the film finds no satisfactory alternative.

*Song of the Thin Man* has no faith in the future, amply demonstrated by the final

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<sup>357</sup> It is likely that the display of female glamour was emphasised in the screenplay, given the PCA's urging of the 'greatest possible care in the selection and photographing of the dresses and costumes for your women. The Production Code makes it mandatory that the intimate parts of the body - specifically the breasts of women - be fully covered at all times.' Letter from Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 20 January 1947. MPAA files for *Song of the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

scene's late introduction of another glamorous *noir* female, Marie Windsor, for display purposes only.

### **The lost city**

*Song of the Thin Man* appropriates the tropes of noir, but cynically and with contempt. It struggles to position Nick and Nora in relation to that world, instead pining for the glamour of the 1930s. But the elegance of that decade is irretrievably lost, like Fitzgerald's city – early in the film, a bottle of whisky is shattered and Asta licks it up, then belches.

The jazz musicians that Nick and Nora encounter are raucous, self-obsessed and childish. They also speak in their own language, a hipster slang that Nick fails to master. The obscure spaces of jazz performance are unfamiliar to Nick and Nora, and they have to be led around town by Clinker (Keenan Wynn), one of Hollis' band members. 'Get with it,' instructs Clinker, as they stand uncomfortably in a jam session, 'They'll think you're a couple of squares!' Of course, Nick and Nora, as distant as a couple of old aristocrats, *are* square and the film does not think this a bad thing.

Their tour of the nightspots begins in what should be a comfortable setting, the penthouse suite of promoter (and murderer) Mitch Talbin. This space is no longer the site of witty repartee – as an unrestrained jam session breaks out, the wild musicians howl at each other over the cacophony. In his very first scene, back in 1934's *The Thin Man*, Nick Charles insisted that 'the important thing is rhythm', a statement that authorised his mastery of comedy. In Talbin's apartment, as the jazz musicians play, Nick attempts to light his cigarette in time with the music. The flame keeps going out at the crucial moment, and accordingly, he misses a tray of drinks being handed



round. Without rhythm or alcohol, Nick and Nora – a couple of squares – seem strangely lost.

The film distances Nick and Nora from this brash performance of modernity. As the jam comes to a crescendo, the camera moves in on a frowning bust of Beethoven, whose expression encapsulates the film's disdain for the post-war city, and its loss of grace and charm. However, no alternative is offered to us, no credible way for Nick and Nora to seem like anything but relics. Writing of her disappointment at the film, Loy described it as

[...] a lacklustre finish to a great series. The characters had lost their sparkle for Bill and me, and the people who knew what it was all about were no longer involved. Woody Van Dyke was dead. Dashiell Hammett and Hunt Stromberg had gone elsewhere. The Hacketts were writing other things.<sup>358</sup>

Unable to conceive of a way for Nick and Nora to relate to the post-war world, *Song of the Thin Man* is a film that tries to get by on memory alone.

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<sup>358</sup> Kotsilibas-Davis, James and Loy, Myrna, *Myrna Loy: Being and Becoming*, p. 208.

### 3. Building Doll's Houses: daughters, discomfort, domesticity

#### *Penny Serenade*

#### *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*

In this chapter, I focus my attention upon parents, daughters and the home. Before presenting my case studies, I shall briefly consider an archetype that links these issues with those of my previous two chapters: the girl detective.

At the conclusion of a high-speed car chase, a father turns to his daughter and says, 'This is getting too dangerous for you. We're going home and you're going to keep out of the whole affair while you're still in one piece.' The irony of the moment is that she is behind the wheel, and she drives off protesting this parental decree, just as she has resisted all previous attempts to trammel or restrict her. Our understanding of the film, and the character, is that 'home' is entirely the wrong place for this young woman – the scene is from *Nancy Drew Detective* (William Clemens, 1938, Warner Bros.).

In the previous chapter, I have contrasted Nick Jr. and Boy as two examples of pre-sexual masculinity, one cloistered in domesticity, the other defined by intrepid excursions into the wilderness. It is noteworthy then that their female counterparts in film, the girls who leave patriarchy behind and venture into the traditionally male world of adventure, are similarly pre-sexual. There are numerous examples from popular literature; Craig and Cadogan list various early twentieth-century schoolgirl detectives who 'stood out in girls' fiction as symbols of emancipation and adventurousness'.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Craig, Patricia, and Cadogan, Mary, *The Lady Investigates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 113.

Writing of screwball heroines, Cavell observes a pattern of absent mothers, which he takes to be at once a convention of comedy, an acknowledgement of the myth that ‘the creation of the woman is the business of man’ and a disinclination to depict the suffragette generation.<sup>360</sup> Craig and Cadogan note a similar trend in their schoolgirl heroines, suggesting that the diminished mother figure permits distance from a prescriptive home. Given that its plot concerns the search for a beneficent older woman, it is striking that *Nancy Drew Detective* makes no reference to Nancy’s absent (presumably deceased) mother, leaving Nancy to bring her father his slippers. In this chapter, I look at films about parents and their daughters, asking how marriage accommodates the female child.

Discussing Nancy Drew and her contemporary Sylvia Silence, Craig and Cadogan write,

Both girls started their careers by helping their investigator fathers, who were quickly relegated to off-stage roles. Almost all the young female investigators were followers in their fathers’ footsteps rather than police-trained professionals. Mothers were either non-existent or merely psychological wallpaper. In this respect girl-detective stories resembled the boarding-school fiction that had been popular since the first decade of the twentieth century, when Angela Brazil neatly swept away domestic restrictions by transporting her heroines from hearth to hockey pitch and throwing in plenty of communal high-jinks.<sup>361</sup>

In manoeuvring their heroines away from that position, then, these stories acknowledge a domestic destiny as the gendered norm. In *Nancy Drew Detective*, the gap between our heroine’s expectations and society’s is frequently the subject of humour. ‘I think every intelligent woman should have a career,’ Nancy (Bonita Granville) informs her middle-aged female teacher, who, we may assume, has fought that battle herself. Yet this naivety is presented positively, especially when held up to ridicule by less enlightened characters. Nancy’s antagonistic relationship with police

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<sup>360</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>361</sup> Craig, Patricia, and Cadogan, Mary, *The Lady Investigates*, p. 115.

chief Captain Tweedy (Frank Orth) is a case in point. When he derides her with the words, 'Now little girl, you'd better go back to the kindergarten and play with your dolly,' we share Nancy's outrage; it is therefore a triumph when, at the end of the film, Tweedy admits that Nancy is 'a pretty brave girl'.

That he does so to Nancy's father, while Nancy sleeps, is significant. The film ends with Nancy and her sidekick Ted (Frankie Thomas) snoozing in the back of the car. After adventures that have seen Nancy driving after villains, hiring a light aircraft and firing off a gun, this final scene restores her to childhood. It also ends the film on an image of Nancy and Ted as a couple, albeit an entirely chaste one.

Ted is a capable and steady small-town lad, not girl-crazy like Andy Hardy, but resignedly falling in with Nancy's schemes so that she doesn't get into too much trouble. Most of the rough stuff in the series falls to Ted, and he usually creates solutions, as in *Nancy Drew Detective* when he fashions a ham radio from discarded equipment in a cellar. Their friendship is one of mutual affection and frustration, perhaps the best indication that one day they might be sweethearts, or even husband and wife (though Nancy would surely be breadwinner in that family). The series' coyness over the subject of teenage sexuality leads Basinger to dismiss its depiction of womanhood:

Two examples of the female detective on-screen are the characters of Nancy Drew and Hildgarde Withers. The first is a teenager, played by Bonita Granville, and the second is an old-maid schoolteacher, played by Edna May Oliver. Both are brilliant, determined, intrepid, self-confident, bossy, and more than able to solve a crime and survive a roughing-up. Significantly, however, neither is really in a position to fall in love and have her detecting ability ruined, called into question, or sacrificed for marriage. One is too young, and the other is too old. In other words, these movies off-set the fact that a woman is doing a man's job by having the woman in both cases be sexless, or not really a woman.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 450.

It is an odd assertion: that to be a woman, one must be sexually active. In fact, these films seem to insist upon the opposite: that womanhood is not dependent upon sexual interest. In *Nancy*, we see a character positively associated with both home and the outdoors, enjoying a healthily antagonistic relationship with both father and boyfriend. Writing of the source novels, Linda K. Christian-Smith advances a more positive view of Nancy's relationship to femininity and domesticity:

Economically dependent and manager of the household, Nancy occupies the traditional position of a white middle-class woman of her time: the domestic discourse frames the gendered and economic dimensions of Nancy Drew as hero. Where traditional male heroes are free from domestic obligations, these novels are clear that domesticity is compatible with heroism, especially when women's domestic involvement is voluntary and managerial.<sup>363</sup>

In this chapter, I challenge the assumption that home must be a restrictive space for daughters. In *Penny Serenade* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, the representation of parents, daughters and domestic space anticipates an imagined, benign future. Both films make the provision of domesticity an accepted duty of marriage, in a manner antithetical to Nick and Nora Charles. In *Penny Serenade* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* the responsibility to create a nurturing environment stands as a metaphor for the success of a marriage, even when it threatens the parents' happy memories of courtship and first love. As we shall see, parents competitively project their egos onto their daughters in these films. My case studies highlight this depiction of children as a function of marriage.<sup>364</sup> In this respect, I posit *Penny Serenade* and *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* as oppositional to Cavell's comedies of remarriage.

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<sup>363</sup> Christian-Smith, Linda K., 'More Than Crime on Her Mind: Nancy Drew as Woman Hero', Jones, Dudley and Watkins, Tony (eds.), *A Necessary Fantasy? The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture* (New York: Garland, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>364</sup> For a fuller account of children and their agency, see chapter 4.

Writing of the absence of children in those films, Cavell suggests that making room for a child involves transforming one's idea of home.<sup>365</sup> One might add that if this child is a daughter, then one is also imbuing an idea of home, or laying the grounds for matriarchy and dynasty, as in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, when a mother states that they are building a house for 'the children, and the children's children'.

These are films about the creation, or renewal, of a home. *Penny Serenade* is the story of a couple and their adopted infant daughter; *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* depicts a slightly older family. Both narratives explore locations as imaginative spaces, cradles in which a daughter might blossom and a marriage be reinvigorated.

### **Recollections of a shared life**

*Helmer*. Can you understand your place in your own home?<sup>366</sup>

*Penny Serenade* tells the story of a marriage in retrospect. It begins at a moment of crisis, as Julie (Irene Dunne) prepares to leave the home she has made with Roger (Cary Grant). In this way, the film can begin after the death of the child, and yet still dramatise her arrival. The framing narrative only intimates at the source of Julie's sadness, showing us her courtship with Roger and the progress of their marriage in flashback as they fight to adopt, and then keep, an infant daughter. The eventual loss of this child to illness divides Julie and Roger, and only the last-minute news that another child is available for adoption reunites them at the film's conclusion.

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<sup>365</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p. 59.

<sup>366</sup> Ibsen, Henrik, *A Doll's House* (New York: Dover, 1992), p. 68.

The setting of the framing narrative, and much of the action in flashback, is Roger and Julie's meagre home in the town of Rosalia. Its division of space reflects the architecture of the marriage; Roger associated with downstairs (a space of work shared with male employees) and Julie upstairs (the living quarters, adapted to the purpose of raising a child). This expressive mise-en-scene becomes increasingly important as the suitability of the home and the success of Roger's business are made determining factors in the authorities' decisions over their family. It is important too that the film's flashbacks show us previous spaces inhabited by Roger and Julie (most prominently, a house in Japan), against which we measure their present existence. This comparison charts a growing seclusion, and perhaps an oppression, resulting from the couple's marriage – thus, while a long shot of the Japanese house shows us its decorative garden, we only see glimpses of the exterior of the home in Rosalia.

By organising narrative events through the act of remembrance, *Penny Serenade* not only suggests the past's impression upon the present, but also foregrounds the mediation of these memories. The mode of narration is explicitly presented as subjective experience, despite the inclusion of 'memories' for which Julie is not present. Jeanine Basinger has argued that

The flashback is a perfect cinematic form for a story about a woman, being in and of itself a rigid, entrapping format that says clearly that there are no choices but the one already made. When a woman faces her final dramatic crisis, she begins to relive her life. This becomes a review of how she made the choice that got her where she is, and in true woman's film attitude, this choice is always, but always the wrong one. A flashback is a passive form of storytelling, in that it visualizes events that are allegedly past, inactive and over with, done. When a woman's story is told in such a way, it illustrates her restrictive present, in which all that matters is already predetermined.<sup>367</sup>

Sadly, Basinger only restricts herself with this account of films that deal complexly with female agency. In *Penny Serenade*, Julie's perception of domestic space changes

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<sup>367</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman's View*, pp. 197-198.

through the act of recollection, disrupting any sense of predetermination and discouraging us from assigning fixed meanings to souvenirs of a narrated past. The film does not employ expressionistic visual effects to these ends, nor does it provide enough evidence of first-person narration for us to advance a coherent subjective reading (there is, for example, no voiceover from Julie). Rather, by stressing the pathetic impact of these objects and spaces *upon* Julie, the film opens up the possibility that material reminders of happiness can, from another perspective, become unbearably poignant.

In one of the few extended pieces on *Penny Serenade*, Caryl Flinn argues that the film's soundtrack articulates the utopian possibilities open to Julie. Noting the use of gramophone records to provoke recollection, Flinn argues that this emphasis upon the aural presents marriage ambiguously. Of *Penny Serenade*'s framing narrative, she writes,

Its highly mediated "story of a happy marriage" makes it impossible for Julie's nostalgic reverie to be construed as a real or utterly reclaimable "truth." At the same time, since the film's female subject finds within this past ways in which her role as a mother is also mediated and constructed – and thus reconstructible – the film acknowledges motherhood as a site for potential utopian alternatives.<sup>368</sup>

The past is not set in stone (or even in wax) but, through the act of replaying, open to reinterpretation. As Julie's sentimental impulse leads her to selectively order her marriage through the songs of her past, so the film invites us to read that past as malleable.

While this is a film about a married couple, its focus is squarely on Julie.

Roger is always kept at a distance, his motivations mysterious to Julie and to us.<sup>369</sup>

To use Cavell's phrase, Roger bears 'the taint of villainy', a characteristic that it is the

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<sup>368</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 149.

<sup>369</sup> Flinn acknowledges this when she writes, of Roger, 'He is strange, ominous.' *Ibid.*, p. 142.



business of marriage to overcome.<sup>370</sup> The shading of Grant's performance makes it difficult to accept Donald Richie's accusation that the film is 'male propaganda'.<sup>371</sup> Echoing Cavell, Richie suggests that, as a result of George Stevens' tendency to idealise his heroines, 'it is the men who indicate to women their ideal state, or else indicate how such a state may be achieved'.<sup>372</sup> However, Richie's example (Julie not knowing how to change her daughter's diaper) is problematic; he fails to note that Roger is as helpless as his wife and that it is the couple's friend Applejack (Edgar Buchanan) who steps in with instruction.

In its focus upon female autonomy, *Penny Serenade*'s framing narrative strongly evokes *A Doll's House*. Like Ibsen's Nora, Julie sees her life as though for the first time. Both texts use commercial metaphors to describe their couples, supplementing failures to communicate with largely decorative children, who serve to justify the marriage. However, unlike Ibsen's heroine, Julie elects not to leave her home, preserving her marriage on the promise of a new child.<sup>373</sup>

## Mementoes and music

Souvenirs are set like clues at the beginning of *Penny Serenade*, before we can assign them narrative associations. The credits play over a framed photograph of the couple, its place on the mantel suggesting the enshrinement of happiness within the domestic. The actors' faces pressed cheek-to-cheek resembles a publicity still,

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<sup>370</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 85.

<sup>371</sup> Richie, Donald, *George Stevens, An American Romantic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), p. 32.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Egil Törnqvist reminds us that many contemporary productions rewrote the ending of the play so that Nora remained in the home. Learning of these unauthorised revisions, Ibsen produced his own alternative ending, with the caveat that it contradicted his intention and was 'a barbaric act of violence'. Ibsen's revised version ends with Nora staying with Helmer for the sake of the children, exclaiming, 'Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them.' Törnqvist, Egil, *Ibsen: A Doll's House* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 41-42.

evoking the genealogy of this star couple.<sup>374</sup> Thus, while Roger-Julie's past has yet to be portrayed, the film presents the popular memory of this star couple as a component of their personal history.<sup>375</sup> The photograph's shared look to the right of frame suggests a consideration of the future, or of the oncoming narrative. With this first image, the film proposes a consideration of how a supposedly fixed past may affect present and future.

The next shot shows a man's hand reaching for a bound volume, upon which we see the handwritten inscription *From Me to You, Xmas 1932*. As with the framed photograph, these words enshrine the couple as a unit. However, while the photograph had allowed us to see the couple together, the intimacy of this autograph, dispensing even with names, suggests introversion and stasis, a stagnation of subjectivity (Me) and objectivity (You). The legend on the cover, *The Story of a Happy Marriage*, reads like an epitaph. It is important, then, that the man consulting this volume is not Roger, but Applejack, whose skewed collar and clay pipe mark him out as a bachelor. His rueful examination of the book shows us that he cares about this marriage, and that he remembers it in his own way.

The insistent happiness of the volume's title is complicated by its contents. The happy marriage's story is not written down – it is made up of a series of gramophone records, aural reproductions of the past, and mementoes tied to that past: baby booties and images of Japan. Applejack plays one of the discs, and we hear a male tenor singing the popular ditty 'You Were Meant for Me'. The lyrics seem to fix 'You' and 'Me', object and subject, in a narrative of romantic destiny. However, as this line is sung, the camera moves right and down to show us Julie ascending a

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<sup>374</sup> Grant and Dunne had previously starred in the comedies *The Awful Truth* and *My Favourite Wife*, both discussed in my next chapter.

<sup>375</sup> This is particularly evident in Roger and Julie's first meeting at the record store, and the later scene of Roger attempting to switch on a light while carrying piles of parcels.

staircase, seen through the banisters. ‘Don’t play that, Applejack!’ she commands, emphasising that once-happy artefacts may act as a painful stimulus to memory.

### **The mise-en-scene of memory**

As the gramophone mediates these memories, the space around it becomes invested with the possibility of renewal. Fixing the framing narrative in one location lends metaphorical weight to the upstairs landing that links the living space, Roger and Julie’s bedroom and the nursery. The transitional space of the landing comes to symbolise the possibility of marital crisis.

While open, the space always seems dark and plain. Thus, while the third shot of the film (right pan with Julie’s movement to the bedroom, left pan with her return) portrays a cramped mise-en-scene, taking in cluttered side tables, dressers full of crockery and picture frames, it leaves us with the feeling of emptiness and purposelessness. The camera movement underlines this sense of futility, moving back upon itself as it traces the relative positions of the gramophone, the staircase to the lower floor, the nursery and the bedroom.

The precision with which the space reflects Julie’s state of mind recalls the detailed sets of the naturalist Ibsen, as does Julie’s travelling cape.<sup>376</sup> Applejack attempts to dissuade her from leaving in a dialogue about the passage of time – she instructs him to book her on the eleven o’clock train, explaining she has considered her decision ‘for days’, while he notes that she and Roger have been married ‘a long time’. Hesitating at the threshold of the marital chamber, Julie responds to Applejack’s appeal. ‘But we don’t need each other anymore,’ she explains. ‘When that happens to two people, there’s nothing left.’ The camera’s restricted movement

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<sup>376</sup> [She comes back with her cloak and hat and a small bag which she puts on a chair by the table.] Ibsen, Henrik, *A Doll’s House*, p. 71.

through the house (staying outside of the nursery and bedroom) makes a spatial connection between Julie's leaving and the past of the marriage inscribed onto domestic space.

Despite Julie's statement, there *is* something left - these foolish things that remind her of...what? As Applejack exits, the camera moves left with him, pausing again at the nursery door, affording us a glimpse of a doll sitting alone on the bed. As Julie leaves her bedroom with a suitcase, the camera repeats its movement leftwards, halting as she is stopped in her tracks by the view into the nursery. This final framing returns us to the space at the top of the stairs, fixing the room's two central pillars as axes around which the movement of the scene has turned.



Fig 8. The landing

In this way, the architecture of the house anticipates the absent child. The mise-en-scene emphasises couples: two pillars, two side lamps and two light fittings on the walls. The pillars' position at the top of the stairs creates another doubling,

separating and gendering the upstairs section of the house (domestic space, Julie and the child) and the downstairs (Roger's workplace and the printing press). As Julie stops to look into the nursery, she reaches out to touch one of the pillars, then moves forward to close the nursery door. It is an important gesture, one repeated a number of times throughout the movie, tangibly connecting the space to its emotional affect. Later in the film, Miss Oliver (Beulah Bondi) taps this pillar when assessing the house's suitability for a child, as though touching it will tell her. At the end of the film, Roger leans against the pillar, bracing himself against Julie's departure.

The device of the 78rpm records fragments the temporal diegesis - each song is finite, but its playing opens up time and extends the possibility for reflection. Flinn observes,

Many of Julie's flashbacks end with songs different from those that had initiated them, conveying not only the sense of discontinuous time but also acknowledging that the past and present are woven out of different temporal modalities.<sup>377</sup>

These modalities are unified in the title *Penny Serenade* (suggesting both thrift and popular currency), which likens the film to a song. Confusingly, while a song of this name did exist, it does not feature in the film – rather, the two words draw an analogy between the place of music and movies in the courtship rituals of twentieth-century Americans, evidenced too by the reference back to the star personae of Grant and Dunne. Julie's sentimental recollections of the marriage, prompted by the playing of these pre-war songs,<sup>378</sup> makes the consideration of the past (of Roger and Julie, of Grant and Dunne, of the romantic histories of audience members, of the changes in

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<sup>377</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 144.

<sup>378</sup> The songs, and their publication dates, are: 'You Were Meant for Me' (1929), 'Just a Memory' (1927), 'The Missouri Waltz' (1914), 'I'm Tickled Pink with a Blue-Eyed Baby' (1930), 'The Japanese Sandman' (1920), 'The Moon was Yellow' (1934), 'The Charleston' (1923), 'My Blue Heaven' (1927), 'Poor Butterfly' (1916), 'These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)' (1936), 'Three O'Clock in the Morning' (1922), 'Ain't We Got Fun' (1921), and 'The Prisoner's Song' (1924).

America since 1932) the subject of the film, prompting the audience to remember along with Julie.

Julie's solitude in the framing narrative forces us to construct Roger through the mediation of music and souvenirs. Flinn observes that 'Roger elaborates both the utopian and dystopian sides of Julie's fantasy', with Grant's performance evoking both benign sensitivity and threatening enigma.<sup>379</sup> Certain sequences (the record store, bringing the baby home for the first time) seem designed to recall Grant's previous comic dexterity,<sup>380</sup> moments of brightness that jar tonally with the film's melancholy texture. Elizabeth Kendall argues for a meta-textual reading of *Penny Serenade*, writing that, 'Its very flashback structure implies a commentary on the genre [of romantic comedy]'.<sup>381</sup> For Kendall, the casting of Dunne and Grant refers us to their roles in *The Awful Truth*, and by extension, the comedies of the previous decade:

[*Penny Serenade*'s] actual subject is the leaking away of vitality from the thirties vision of romance, even though they use opposite means to convey the same message, [...as] characters who are the inverse of McCarey's sophisticates gradually slip into despair. [...] The "youth," as reproduced throughout the movie, is a reprise of the conventions of romantic comedy; the "middle age" concerns the realization of the falsity of the genre's promises.<sup>382</sup>

While there is merit to this reading, especially in its assumption of an audience skilled in reading across films, I shall be arguing for a less binary relationship between *Penny Serenade* and the comedies of the 1930s. Rather than acting as a 'commentary' upon an impossible utopia, the film uses collisions of tone and convention to convey the complexity of memory, and the possibility of multiple

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<sup>379</sup> Flinn, p. 142.

<sup>380</sup> *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940, MGM), Grant's previous film role, is the first example of his mature comic persona.

<sup>381</sup> Kendall, Elizabeth, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 231.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

readings. In so doing, the film articulates an anxiety of marriage – that an intimate partner may be ultimately unknowable.

### **Incompatible spaces**

The film's first two flashbacks take us through Roger and Julie's first meeting, their courtship and marriage. These sequences avoid domestic environments, showing us little of the couple's life apart from each other. Rather, the spaces in which we see the couple developing a love affair and moving towards marriage are without exception awkward, or crowded. Their romance plays out in a record shop, on a city street, in nightclubs, at the beach, a New Year's Eve party, a train. As with Nick and Nora, the relationship is defined by its connection to a social world. However, in this case, sociality seems to intrude upon the couple, making it difficult to know each other through being alone together. In this way, more pressure is loaded onto the creation of a domestic environment. It becomes a matter not just of finding a home but also of making a space in which they can find one another. Home is a refuge.

Each flashback begins with Julie putting on a record, the film cutting through diegetic and temporal space via a circular wipe that emerges from the centre of the spinning disc. The first flashback begins with her replacing 'You Were Meant For Me' on the gramophone. The tenor singing the tune acts as a bridge into the flashback, as we hear the same record playing on a loudspeaker outside the record shop where Julie works. It is the record skipping that stops Roger in the street, and the sight of Julie through the shop window that prompts him to enter. While the moment is framed as a conventional meet-cute, the cross-diegetic music heightens our awareness of Julie's retrospection. Thus, 'You Were Meant For Me' sounds

possessive, while the record skipping causes the phrase ‘that never lets me free’ to repeat.

Kendall suggests that this ‘opening sequence presents a shorthand version of a romantic comedy, predicated on the assumption that the experienced audience could grasp the conventions as fast as the movie-making team could think them up.’<sup>383</sup> The specific reference seems to be *The Awful Truth*, whose protagonists meet when buying a dog.<sup>384</sup> However, in that film, Lucy (Irene Dunne) relates this meeting as a well-practised anecdote. In *Penny Serenade*, Stevens highlights Roger’s gaze, lending the subsequent pick-up the air of a commercial transaction. This is presented benignly, as a screwball encounter. However, later events that make a negative connection between marriage and commerce lead us to recall this first encounter uneasily. The couple’s initial exchange is halting - quite unlike the verbose and witty protagonists of 1930s comedy, Roger and Julie have little to say to one another.

The following scenes stress Roger’s intrusion upon Julie’s existing routine, walking her home then talking his way into her apartment so that he can play his records. The moment places him as a child, rootless and in need of care. While they go up to her apartment together, and the camera does not follow them, the scene is not at all sexual. Similarly, the following scenes of courtship forego intimacy, showing us the couple amidst crowds. We learn little of their lives outside of their devotion to one another. There are no parents, no family, and no friends save for Applejack and a fellow shopgirl, loading even more upon the success of their marriage. Kendall criticises the film’s inability to ‘project any romantic sensation between the husband

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>384</sup> The prominence of various models of the His Master’s Voice dog (who resembles Mr. Smith) in this scene strengthens the association with *The Awful Truth*.



and the wife'<sup>385</sup> but fails to note the very precise connection made between public space and emotional disconnection.

This is not to say that Roger and Julie are an unhappy couple (such a statement would invalidate them from my corpus) but that I think we are given grounds for concern about their compatibility. In the film's second flashback, we see the couple together at the beach. Roger brushes off Julie's complaints that they are never alone, and it is clear that when this couple do talk to each other, they are guarded, with Julie frightened to say what is in her heart and Roger resistant to change. The fun of reading fortune cookie mottos to each other sours when Julie's manifests her desire for family: *You will get your wish A BABY*. Roger dismisses this as a prediction of future happiness, saying, 'Those things are all the bunk. They never come true'; nevertheless, he conceals his (*A wedding soon*) from Julie, picking another that reads, *You'll always be a bachelor*. That Roger might think this preferable shows us the character's self-interest. Annoyed by a bratty child at his deckchair, Roger tells Julie that he doesn't mind kids as long as they are not pests. Keeping in mind Britton's suggestion that Grant's persona is characterised by irresponsibility, we might suggest that Roger does not like children because he is one himself.

The uneasy connection between the couple, space and society delicately implies a dissatisfying sexual life. After Julie has criticised Roger for being 'unromantic', they return to their beach huts. She complains that he'd promised to 'rent this place to ourselves' and he jokes 'only the sea, the beach I couldn't get'. A titillating exchange about Roger teaching Julie how to swim and whether or not it is safe leads to a passionate embrace. After one kiss, she pushes him away, telling him to get dressed. Reluctantly, he backs off and they enter separate beach huts.

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

Inasmuch as the film can without contravening censorship restrictions, the scene conveys a hesitation over the couple's sexual compatibility. This sense remains throughout the film, perhaps the most important distinction between *Penny Serenade* and screwball comedy. Kendall is correct, then, in identifying a lack of 'romantic sensation', though I will argue that this is the film's intention.

Roger's eventual proposal to Julie comes as a result of being posted to his newspaper's Japanese office. Amidst a hectic New Year's Eve party, the unexpected engagement begins just after Applejack has warned Julie about getting too involved with the self-interested newspaperman. Flinn describes the setting for the proposal, a fire escape away from the party, unflatteringly:

[...] the scene erupts in an unpleasant outburst of non-representational signs. Confetti is strewn wildly through the air; party guests descend on the couple on the fire escapes [sic] outside; the scene is claustrophobic and visually grim. Cacophonous non-diegetic music is heard; diegetically, noisemakers, horns, and whistles clutter the soundtrack.<sup>386</sup>

If Flinn somewhat overstates the oppressive visual quality of the moment, her point regarding the soundtrack is well made. As before, company masks a sense of detachment. The excited cheers are not for Julie; she is surrounded by strangers.

I have argued in this section that an undercurrent of dissatisfaction is expressed through disconnection with social space. This is evident in the couple's marriage ceremony, introduced by a shot through a window-frame that visually divides the couple. The unease provoked by Julie's intonation of 'til death do us part' is reinforced in the following scene as Roger prepares to leave her, Applejack and Dot (Ann Doran) on a train platform. Hoping for privacy in which to say their temporary goodbyes, Roger and Julie repair to his sleeper compartment. The couple's embrace

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<sup>386</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 141.

is seen through the ‘cabin door [which] is left ajar, splitting the screen’,<sup>387</sup> a composition which Flinn uses to illustrate Roger’s opaqueness, writing, ‘his large body obliterates hers in a remarkably stylised, disturbing moment’.<sup>388</sup> I am more interested in the way that the image pushes the couple together, suggesting the consummation that will take place after the train pulls away with Julie aboard. There is no implication of the train as a romantic venue, more that this consummation has been forced by circumstance (I am reminded of Julie’s frostiness to the ardent Roger at the beach, even more so by the ‘cold’ imagery evoked - snow at their proposal, ice on the train). Here, the claustrophobic space conveys a subtle insinuation that marital sex might be unfulfilling, perhaps even unwanted.

Later that night, Julie disembarks at a lonely station platform. Waving away the train, we cannot help but feel that this wedding night bodes ill for the couple. Her marriage vows – ‘til death do us part’ – have already been compromised. As she watches the train carrying her husband away, the film alludes to a wartime nexus of marriage/death/melodrama that would have been painfully familiar to contemporary audiences.

### **House of borrowed paper**

We move from a deserted platform to a crowded one, three months later – as ‘The Japanese Sandman’ plays on the soundtrack, we see Roger meeting Julie with a bunch of violets. The choice of music signals the dream-like quality of this exotic interlude in Japan, depicting the couple’s continued precarious relation to society. They embrace on the platform, with scant regard for the curious and distasteful glances from Japanese commuters. A process shot of the couple laughing together as

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid.

they are pulled through the streets in a rickshaw exaggerates their distance from the goings-on of the city.

Stepping down from the rickshaw, Julie surveys her luxurious Japanese home, complete with ornamental garden and ornamental servants, and says, 'It's like something in a dream.' This is not a home that the couple have created together, Roger explaining that he has rented it as-seen, paying 'the lease, the furniture, two servants, three kids, a cat and her kids, all for 2000 yen'. He maintains a distanced yet paternal relationship with these children ('I'm teaching him to be a first baseman'), further confusing Julie as to his plans for their future. More worryingly, Roger has paid the lease with his advance and on the promise of an inheritance. Unable to convert the sum in yen to dollars, Roger describes a first home built on shaky foundations.

Excitedly, Roger takes Julie on a tour of the house: open, fragile and full of light. The domestic tour will become a familiar motif, in each case referring back to this first instance in Japan. Transformation seems to be inscribed upon the space in the way that the traditional sliding *fusuma* (doors made of wood and paper) change the dimensions of rooms. The two-storey building anticipates the house in Rosalia, with Julie associated with the upstairs once again. Sitting on their bed, amidst these dream-like environs, Julie announces her pregnancy to Roger. 'Sometimes wishes do come true,' she tells him, showing him the fortune cookie motto that she saved, now enshrined within a locket. For her, it is a precious souvenir of their courtship, and of their predestined happiness. For Roger, and for us, it is a reminder of their divergent desires.

The manner in which Julie announces her pregnancy recalls Nora Charles at the conclusion of *After the Thin Man*. There too a physical object (the baby booties)

required a husband to make a leap of imagination. In that case, however, the coyness around verbalising a blessed event permitted a joke about detection between that most communicative of couples, Nick and Nora. Between Roger and Julie, a couple who rarely seem to talk, the evasion is more troubling. The terms of their marriage make the situation more awkward. The scene cannot play as cute comedy (as in *After the Thin Man*) or veer off into melodrama, leaving us with feigned happiness and the tension over Roger's irresponsibility.

In *Holiday* (George Cukor, 1938, Columbia), Grant plays a similarly carefree character. In that film, his utopian fantasies are scrutinised and attacked, but he articulately defends them. His character Johnny Case has developed a personal philosophy of life, which Linda Case (Katharine Hepburn) defends with gusto: 'If he wants to dream for a while, he can dream for a while, and if he wants to come back and sell peanuts, oh, how I'll believe in those peanuts!'

Unlike Johnny, who rejects conventionalism from a sense of moral idealism, Roger is simply careless about his duties. The Japan sequence ends with an earthquake that destroys their home, as though a direct result of the couple's disagreement over Roger's spendthrift ways. Julie rejects Roger's plan to tour the world on an inheritance that gets smaller every time he describes it. Julie's clear head, and Roger's sulkiness, ensures that she gains moral ground through this dispute.

Typically, the film signals calamity on its soundtrack, as the insistent tinkling of wind chimes presages the natural disaster. Trapped upstairs, the heavily pregnant Julie tries to escape the falling timbers. She is caught on the collapsing staircase (referring us back once more to the transitional space in the Rosalia house), the scene ending on a shot of rubble falling on a slip of paper, the motto from the fortune cookie. Again, the film uses a souvenir to depict the present acting upon the past. In

this case, the touristic Orientalism of the fortune cookie motto stands for the fantasy of a life in Japan. Stevens holds the shot, punctuating each stinging piece of debris falling with staccato chords on the non-diegetic soundtrack, an aural rendering of the violence done to Julie's brittle idyll.

## Ellipsis

*Stan.* Y'know, it's a well-known fact that all the happiness in a home... when you have a baby and, and there's a wife, and you... and the baby. It's a well-known fact. I know, I've read about *that*.

*Ollie.* I'm beginning to think that you're right.

*Stan.* You bet your life I'm right. Y'know, I'm not as dumb as you look.

*Their First Mistake* (George Marshall, 1932, Hal Roach Studios)

The third flashback ends with the couple's return to America. Rather than show the couple travelling, Stevens creates an ellipsis with three shots linked by dissolves: (1) a boat on the ocean, (2) a view of an approaching pier, and (3) the sign for San Francisco Memorial Hospital. We do not see Julie's rescue, the aftermath of the earthquake, or the couple's departure from Japan. This is the first of several ellipses that occur at crucial points in the narrative, moments that occlude an outpouring of emotion and which always signal a shift in the state of the marriage. In this case, the ellipsis marks an end to the dream of exotic luxury, and a shift in Roger's dynamic with Julie, from husband to potential father.

The score's spare and sombre strings complement these three unpopulated shots, reflecting Julie's emotional numbness in a move from crowded spaces to an empty mise-en-scene. Inside the hospital, we find her in bed, as her doctor completes a diagnosis of lifelong infertility. Attempting to remain cheery, he assures her, 'you'll be up playing tennis in a couple of weeks', a cruelly ironic image that stresses both her new poverty and Roger's absence.

Outside the room, Roger stands in an empty corridor, framed by Stevens to heighten the clinical space that takes up the left of the image. We are told that he has been granted permission to enter for the first time – he approaches Julie’s bed hesitantly, offering her a small posy of flowers that bitterly recall the violets he presented to her in Japan. It is a touching gesture, if somewhat dwarfed by the large bouquet that a nurse has placed at Julie’s bedside prior to his entrance.

The comparison heightens our sense of Roger’s inadequacy in this situation, confirmed as he struggles to console her. He dismisses his previous ‘silly ideas’ and describes a happy future for the two of them in the small town of Rosalia where he will run the local newspaper. Despite his diminished ambition, Roger still promises the world (using the language of the marketplace), offering his wife ‘anything you want... furniture, car, clothes, everything.’ A close-up of Julie (up until now shot in inscrutable profile) shows her trying to encourage Roger but being distracted by the persistent cry of babies in the corridor. She picks nervously at the posy he has brought her. The flashback ends with her sorrowful observation that she can never have ‘the one thing I really wanted’, and a held shot on Roger’s devastated face.

### **Empty space and Applejack**

The fourth flashback (set to ‘The Prisoner’s Song’) begins with the couple being shown around the Rosalia house by an estate agent, and their differing reactions. The scene opens with a partial image of the house’s exterior: we do not see its place on the street, just a house number dwarfed by the overhanging ‘Courier Press’ sign, the general store placard next door and the shadows of leaves cast by sunlight. The image contains both the values and the anxieties of Roger and Julie. This is Roger’s small-town idyll, but the prominence of commerce also symbolises

his dominant ambition, and Julie's concomitant fear that this might be a business rather than a home.

Roger has described small-town America to Julie in terms familiar from 1930s cinema – the space of rebirth and expansion, where community involvement and communion with the landscape enrich the lives of a couple. However, the film shows us little of the town or its other residents, surprising given that Roger is running a newspaper. There are vague references to the economic privations of the Depression, amusingly depicted in the tiny advances Roger makes in the *Courier's* circulation figures. In this respect, Kendall's suggestion that the film comments upon the failure of the idealism of 1930s cinema seems appropriate: the newspaper offices are shabby, empty and ill-equipped. They are taking on something that has failed.

Entering the hallway, Julie wanders toward a door looking into the printing press, which takes up the ground floor. In contrast to Roger's evident enthusiasm, she appears distracted and distanced from his conversation with the estate agent. By playing the scene without audible dialogue and just the non-diegetic score, we are similarly cut off from Roger's excitement, focused instead upon the visual signs of Roger and Julie's division. Framed through the glass window of the door, Julie looks down but we cannot see what has drawn her attention. The two men join her at the glass, Roger peering intently through at the machinery. The estate agent swings the door open, revealing an advertising image of a smiling child tacked onto it. The remainder of the tour will further associate the architecture of the house with the absent child.

Stevens shoots the upstairs landing, the space of the framing narrative, from a completely different angle, emphasising the bar-like staircase rails, thus denying us any comforting familiarity. An extreme close-up of Roger happily surveying the



living quarters exaggerates his short-sightedness, a trait redressed when the estate agent shows them a nursery room. The couple are framed in the doorway, looking sadly into a space that holds seemingly impossible possibilities. As in the framing narrative, the space is withheld from us, but the camera pans right across a wall decorated with a childish frieze, the bar motif repeated by the shadow of two window slats. The whole sequence is defined by a feeling of enclosure and blockage, exemplified by the door that sticks, the opening of which causes a window to slam. It is a tour of a flawed household, expressive of Julie's melancholy and in stark contrast to Roger's ebullience over the house in Japan.

At one level, then, the mise-en-scene of the Rosalia house externalises the couple's emotions. The replacement of dialogue by non-diegetic score throughout this sequence conveys the couple's paralysing inability to talk about the things that matter. (Once Applejack arrives at Rosalia, this is felt even more strongly.) However, the temporal distance afforded by our awareness of the framing narrative keeps us removed from Roger and Julie's emotional experience. This curious combination of subjectivity and objectivity reminds me somewhat of Deborah Thomas' account of point of view in *Advise and Consent* (Otto Preminger, 1962, Columbia):

The description of Preminger's camera as 'detached' should not be taken to mean 'cold' or 'uncaring', but merely to indicate that its compassionate interest extends across a broad sweep of characters, regardless of political position or power, even those who are in conflict with one another in the narrative itself. Thus, although we are encouraged to take an interest in the political intrigues of the narrative, we are positioned to stand apart from them at the same time.<sup>389</sup>

Similarly, Stevens's camera views the space in a way that makes Julie's lassitude and Roger's enthusiasm equally understandable. While the mise-en-scene pushes us

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<sup>389</sup> Thomas, Deborah, *Reading Hollywood, Spaces and Meanings in American Film* (London: Wallflower, 2001), p. 72.

toward sympathy with Julie, our fondness for Roger (and the extreme close-up of Grant's smiling face) communicates his excitement. The subtlety of Grant and Dunne's performances moves the use of mise-en-scene beyond a simple binary of emotion.

The divide growing between Roger and Julie is more explicitly represented by the allocation of upstairs and downstairs space. While both spaces are open-plan, upstairs has been associated with blockage, material reminders of loss and therefore Julie's restriction. In contrast, the downstairs print room is open and light, representative of Roger's enthusiasm and his lack of expertise. Thus, while the machinery exists to supply a service to the town (which we see bustling past the windows), Roger cannot operate it properly. His only assistant is a teenage youth named Skeeter, a kid to whom he can be paternal without responsibility. We never see Skeeter again, emblematic of Roger's disinclination to dwell on Julie's miscarriage.

The newspaper excludes Julie, particularly once Applejack arrives to take up Roger's offer of a role as press manager, rekindling the male camaraderie of bachelorhood. Julie (dressed in housekeeping clothes) leans over the banisters to welcome Applejack, as though acknowledging an implicit domestic boundary. Applejack's mediating role permits explicit reference to Roger's attempts to substitute fatherhood – the telegram of invitation sent by Roger excitedly repeats the phrase 'fastest growing little' in relation to the town and the press, Applejack inspects the broken press and asks, 'What you been feeding it?', while Roger's front page is spelt atrociously, like the attempts of a child. 'The newspaper always comes first around here,' Julie jokes, unintentionally revealing Roger's neglect.

The decision to adopt is made in Roger's absence. Julie sits alone in the nursery. Disturbed by Applejack, and hearing that Roger is out collecting subscriptions to supplement the newspaper's small circulation, she invites Applejack to have dinner with her. Applejack's discomfort at the dinner table reminds us that we have never seen Roger in such a setting. Stevens cuts from close-ups of the two picking at their food to a side-on framing that foregrounds Roger's empty chair.



Fig. 9 The absent father

Applejack admits that he was himself adopted, and slowly, sensitively pushes Julie towards her decision to adopt. Strikingly, this is the most emotionally mature conversation Julie has had with a man so far in the film (the others were also with Applejack – when he tries to prevent her leaving in the framing narrative and when he warns her off Roger at the New Year's Eve party). While Applejack is associated with the child, then, he also acts as a guardian angel, covering for Roger's inadequacies and responding to Julie's emotional needs in a way that her husband

cannot. The characterisation of Applejack in this way addresses predestination in a way that does not make it an overall ethos. Coincidence and fate structure the narrative of the film, but they are not represented as nameless forces that strip agency from the protagonists. Rather, characters like Applejack and Miss Oliver offer predestination as a space of benign interaction.

Roger's intrusion upon this scene makes him seem supplemental. Applejack's discomfort, and Roger's confusion over the topic of conversation, leaves us uncertain about the strength of Roger's commitment to adoption. 'Why, the very idea!' laughs Julie, 'my husband talking about things like this with the printer!' Grant plays a flicker of uncertainty across his face, shooting a look at Applejack that conveys desperation and reproach. The moment is staged so that the three stand awkwardly in the space at the top of the stairs, reinforcing the casual nature with which this momentous decision is made. 'I suppose it's settled!' says Roger, reservedly making the leap into fatherhood.

### **A fairy (god)mother**

The couple's visit to the adoption centre and their subsequent attempts at parenting demonstrate the tonal range of the film. If, as Kendall asserts, the movie acts as an elegy to the idealistic 1930s screwball, we must account for the place it finds for comedy within melodrama. One difference obviously presents itself: while the protagonists of *The Awful Truth* know they are funny, those in *Penny Serenade* do not. Carrying a sleeping child to bed is frustrating and stressful for Roger and Julie; for us, it is slapstick. I am drawn back to the idea of detachment, and of Stevens' tendency to observe and record rather than participate.

Driving to the adoption centre, Roger and Julie have a playful argument that associates adoption with Julie's domestic routine (something of no concern to Roger). Brushing off his concerns that she will fall in love with the first baby that she sees, Julie reminds him, 'I've been doing the shopping in this family for some time now'. 'I don't know, you came back with this tie, didn't you?' quips Roger, uncomfortably patting his dickie bow. As well as reminding us of the couple's domestic naivety, the exchange highlights the personal as mass-produced. In this analogy, Julie's memories (and by implication, the audience's) play at 78rpm, Roger can pick his wife up along with a stack of records, and the most intimate sentiments are expressed through fortune cookie mottos. The moment also compares Julie and Roger as providers, something that will be picked up in a later scene.

The adoption centre is a new kind of space for the film, official and authoritative, ruled over by the pragmatic Miss Oliver. Flinn describes her as 'patriarchal'<sup>390</sup> – it might be more accurate to say that she is kind yet firm, punishing irresponsibility but nurturing the couple's parental urges. Contemporary audiences would likely have associated Beulah Bondi with the maternal roles she had played in *Vivacious Lady* (George Stevens, 1938, Columbia), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939, Columbia) and *Our Town* (Sam Wood, 1940, Principal Artists Productions), a space she seems suited to fill given *Penny Serenade*'s reticence over its couple's families.

Miss Oliver is a human face of bureaucracy, assessing the couple's suitability (financial and emotional) for adoption. Thus, while Roger and Julie have a shopping list of desirable qualities in their ideal child, Miss Oliver convinces them of the impossibility of their demands. Julie's demands are decorative – blonde, blue-eyed,

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<sup>390</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 143.

curly hair – while Roger is emphatic about practical ease – he wants a two-year old son, housebroken. Miss Oliver patiently explains that the system does not work like that, and Roger and Julie stand before her desk like schoolchildren. Like Applejack, Miss Oliver guides the couple, though her age and institutional status contrast his quotidian wisdom. They are two sides of the adoption system in which child-rearing is formalised and subject to review. However, while Applejack is part of the family (if only as much as a trusted and much-loved servant might be), Miss Oliver is not. Her approval is needed to secure a baby – it is won, but deceitfully, as Roger lies about his income. As we shall see, such transgression promises punishment.

Before judging the couple to be suitable for parenthood, Miss Oliver must assess their living space. The film prefaces her visit with Roger coming upstairs to find Julie cleaning the house. ‘Look honey, left from the earthquake!’ she says, holding up some gramophone records. ‘What, Japan?’ asks Roger casually, adding, ‘We’d better buy some more!’ The cheerful negation of hurtful memories hides denial and the possibility of those memories having effects. Equally, the acknowledgement that a record might be a souvenir (something that survives its original use), rather than just a medium for its music, seems hopeful – marking this moment as a move towards a new life.

The sequence begins with Miss Oliver entering through the front door, her first sight being Applejack venting his frustration on the printing press, impotently hammering at it with his fists. Realising he is observed, Applejack greets Miss Oliver shamefacedly. The scene contrasts the two characters in connection with Roger and Julie. Amusingly, Applejack becomes a child in Miss Oliver’s presence as well, caught in a lie (knowing of the mess upstairs, he claims the couple are in church).

Upstairs, Julie dances to one of her records ('The Charleston'), imaginatively spicing up her housework. We see Miss Oliver look through the banisters in amazement at Julie's antics, and a point of view shot of Julie's shapely legs. Miss Oliver interrupts the dance, announcing her presence by knocking on one of the columns at the head of the stairs. The strangeness of the gesture draws attention to the unconventional space, a home without a door, approachable only by the staircase. Again, Miss Oliver's ability to infantilise is shown, as Julie ducks down, like a child caught in a naughty act. The subsequent tour of the house will be characterised by Julie's shame at the mess and meagre surroundings. Despite this, the women are allied in the way that Miss Oliver externally validates the concerns over finance that Julie expressed in Japan.

There is a deliberate comparison made between our previous tour of the house, when Julie was distanced and unimpressed. In that instance, the music on the soundtrack created a space for objectivity. In this scene, the long pauses between dialogue engender awkwardness between the two women, with Julie rushing to fill gaps in conversation. Miss Oliver's inspection reveals the dangers the space might hold for a young child – the pail on the breakfast table, the jammed door, the window that slams.

This changes when Miss Oliver is shown the nursery. Where previously Stevens had kept his camera at the door, holding close-ups of Roger and Julie's troubled faces then panning across a wall, this composition takes in the whole room. We see that it is light, full of toys and a child-sized desk, the walls decorated with friezes of the alphabet. Miss Oliver comments approvingly, 'Any child would be lucky to have a room like this.' The camera pans left to show us the window out onto

the roof yard, where we see Roger working on something. The camera movement unifies the couple, including Miss Oliver in this space that imagines a future family.

Outside, Roger is testing out a slide he has built, another implication of the potential hazards that might befall an infant. His high spirits, and the way Miss Oliver instructs them to sit before her (they perch on the slide, looking up), restates the couple as children. She tells them that a baby girl is available, one 'like no other'. However, Roger fights against Julie's growing enthusiasm for the idea. As Miss Oliver leaves, Julie leaves him sulking outside and secures a promise they will have first refusal. Despite Roger's petulance, for the first time, an imagined future fills the empty domestic space with hope.

### **Home and hysteria**

*Ollie.* I'll go. You might spill it...  
- *Brats* (James Parrott, 1930, Hal Roach Studios)

At the nursery, the couple enter a room of children playing together under the watchful eye of nurses. This vision of supervised sociality reminds us of the solitude of the couple's life – when they have a child, we never see it in a comparable social situation. In this environment, Roger's continued resistance ('but she isn't a boy!') soon crumbles. It is as though Julie's impossible dream has come true – the nurses' uniforms and the cries of the babies remind us of the ironies of the scene at San Francisco Memorial Hospital. Once again, the soundtrack encourages us to sympathise with Julie, particularly through the jarring chords whenever Roger attempts to argue, as though his dissent threatens to rupture the diegesis. Seeing her holding the child, he concedes, 'She's yours, I guess.' This seems like a bad way of adopting a child.



Ownership is explored in the extended sequence of bringing the child home for the first time. In yet another tour of the house, these scenes highlight constriction, as though the presence of the child has filled it beyond capacity. Caryl Flinn suggests that intrusive diegetic noise represents a ‘dysfunctioning utopia’<sup>391</sup> as the couple’s efforts to remain silent, and prevent the baby waking, ensure accidental noisiness. At the front door, Roger and Julie freeze as the doorbell jangles. Roger’s contortions, attempting to work the light switch while carrying a tottering pile of baby things, result in him on the floor amidst the scattered parcels. Essaying the stairs, the couple remove their shoes and run to avoid creaking. The domestic space becomes an obstacle course, made more challenging by their burden (she with the baby, he with the baby’s effects).

As my epigraph implies, these scenes owe a debt to Laurel and Hardy, and particularly to *Brats*, upon which Stevens worked as cinematographer. In that film, Stan and Ollie attempt to put mischievous sons (played by Stan and Ollie) to bed quietly. Their abject failure also manifests as intrusive noise – Ollie’s lullaby being ruined by Stan’s bum note, and Ollie tip-toeing onto the bulb of a discarded toy horn. The comparable scenes from *Penny Serenade* recall tropes familiar from Laurel and Hardy shorts: insistent shushing, the intransigence of inanimate objects, the treachery of staircases, and the foolishness of adults around children. Durnat argues that ‘Stan is the “child”, Ollie is the “parent” [...] if children predominantly identify with Stan and think Ollie rather fierce, parents identify predominantly with Ollie, surprisingly patient victim of Stan’s childlike “helping”’.<sup>392</sup> We might qualify this assertion by noting that Ollie is a very child-like parent, as when he takes back his moves on the draughtboard at the beginning of the film. As with Roger and Julie, we understand

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<sup>391</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 142.

<sup>392</sup> Durnat, Raymond, *Durnat on Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 139.

Stan and Ollie to move fluidly between roles, and in so doing, expose these roles as constructions. Both films also depict a domestic space hostile to its occupants - *Brats* concludes with a tidal wave sweeping into the nursery from a flooded bathroom.

With less extreme results, the domestic space also turns against Roger and Julie in this sequence. The narrow corridor linking the couple's bedroom and the nursery is important in this regard. While it represents the hesitant connection building between the new parents and their charge, it also makes the couple problematic *as* parents; there is, after all, only room for one person to pass down it comfortably. Continually called back to the side of the cot, the couple are unsynchronised and awkward; getting caught in the cramped corridor, colliding in doorways, Roger stubbing his toe twice. Despite Roger's reassurances, Julie measures their errors against the strictures of a typewritten feeding schedule, tacked to the nursery wall. Their slapstick always verges on hysteria, the couple's rush to the nursery resembling a race and Roger impotently shouting at Julie when the baby cries. The tone is frantic, even calamitous.

Despite this, the sequence shows the couple becoming familiar with their child, with Roger switching designation from 'it' to 'her'. To some extent, this is also depicted competitively, as though each half of the couple wants to stake a claim to parenthood. When Roger calms the crying child by stiffly rocking it, he proudly announces, 'Just wanted her daddy!', the film dramatising a previously unseen commitment to fatherhood. During the night, Julie brings the baby through into their bed without the sleeping Roger's knowledge. Later on, Roger checks the cot, finds the baby gone, and panics. 'The baby's kidnapped!' he cries, after turning the nursery upside down.<sup>393</sup> Discovering Julie and the baby, he snaps, "Don't ever do that to me

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<sup>393</sup> See my discussion of Lindbergh and infant kidnapping in Chapter 2.

again”. Underlying this frantic activity is the memory of Julie’s miscarriage, the fear of death, and the knowledge that the child has been granted to them on probation. When the couple struggle to silence a ringing alarm clock, we laugh, but cautiously. As Julie smothers it with a pillow, the scene takes on a morbid air.

If the baby throws into doubt the couple’s ability to function in private, that uncertainty is heightened in public. In the following scene, set the next morning, Roger rushes downstairs to quiet the presses. The (male) employees of The Rosalia Courier gingerly troop upstairs to view the baby, impinging upon a space previously associated with Julie and maternal desire. Stevens cuts to a scene of Julie preparing the child for its bath. The setting is the kitchen, with a view through the door into the living room, where the employees sit watching around the table. The frame of the doorway, through which they crane to watch Julie, clogs the perspectival line. The kitchen feels cramped, with Applejack peering around the door and Roger jammed into the corner of the room. His repeated offers of assistance (‘Can I help... Sure you don’t want me to help?’), accompanied by the cracking of nuts from the other room, add to the pressure on Julie to perform the role of mother. After a tense few minutes, Julie herself cracks, shouting at the spectators to leave. They return downstairs to the arena of sweat and newsprint, with only Roger and Applejack remaining. The moment reprises the problem of the crowd that has dogged the couple.

Flinn writes,

It must be noted that the maternalization of the film’s male characters arguably deprives the woman of one of the few roles admissible to her. But at the same time, that Apple Jack [sic] and Roger share in this maternal function demonstrates how arbitrary and social a phenomenon mothering actually is.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Flinn, Caryl, *Strains of Utopia*, p. 142.

When Julie admits that she does not know how to bathe her child, Applejack steps in, expertly taking charge and cracking wise that, when it comes to diapers, he's a 'one-pin man'. It is a moment of competence that highlights the couple's tentativeness, but also their uncertain relation to adulthood.

For all of Applejack's bashfulness, he is a man with a fixed relation to society. Talking of the baby, he tells the couple to decide 'who's boss, you or it'. We know more about his past than we do of either Roger or Julie - having had three sisters, he mediates the gender divide in a way that neither husband nor wife can, bridging the upstairs and downstairs space of the house. Leaving the kitchen to return to work, he tells the couple to write down his instructions because he might 'get a better offer'. In Applejack, we see the possibility of an existence in which the couple's oppositions are resolved.

### **Nativity, death and division**

'I see a vacant seat,' replied the Ghost, 'in the poor chimney corner, and a crutch without an owner, carefully preserved. If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.'

'No, no,' said Scrooge. 'Oh no, kind Spirit! Say he will be spared.'<sup>395</sup>

In *The Child on Film*, Karen Lury describes two performative modes open to child actors:

As audiences are less likely to feel manipulated if they believe that the child actor is genuine or (a) natural – which implies somehow that the audience is not being duped – child actors often work very hard to hide their learned acting skills. In short, they must not be seen to be acting. Of course, a similar effect may be achieved if the child can remain apparently unaware that they are acting, and it is this version of the successful child performance (which may be more or less true) which often dominates the histories, biographies and publicity relating to children acting in film.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 68.

<sup>396</sup> Lury, Karen, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 150.

Lury notes that these modes are dictated by the common intention for children to be perceived as ‘attractive and sympathetic figures’<sup>397</sup> and that children ‘who present an unnatural appearance – too trained, too precocious, or what is often termed too “stage school” – are not only seen as “bad” actors but are often actively disliked’.<sup>398</sup> In the remainder of my discussion of *Penny Serenade*, I argue that Stevens works against these conventions. Towards the end of the film, the six-year old Trina (Eva Lee Kuney) is cast and written to discourage us from sympathy. The child does not volunteer insight into the world of adults – rather, she seems almost entirely disconnected from that world, and living on borrowed time.

The ‘fairy godmother’ Miss Oliver described Trina as ‘a child like no other’. In the sixth flashback, which takes in Trina celebrating her mother’s birthday and a disastrous school nativity, the child is portrayed as unearthly, insubstantial, hardly there at all. The inadequacies of Kuney’s performance, mechanical and seemingly responding to off-camera prompts, add to this effect, making Trina a phantom long before she dies.

Physically, Kuney is not ‘cute’.<sup>399</sup> Wispy and plain, she evokes the sickly child and the setting of her scenes around the Christmas period encourages an association with Tiny Tim, the Dickens character whose frailty provokes protective feelings in the flinty Ebenezer Scrooge. There is an important difference: part of the poignancy of Tiny Tim comes from his maturity, and his hope that

people saw him in church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant for them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Kuney had appeared as a baby in the Little Rascals film *Little Papa* (Gus Meins, 1935, Hal Roach Studios). I am conscious of conscience pangs as a result of describing her performance in *Penny Serenade* so uncharitably. In my defence, given the plethora of child actors that Stevens might have chosen from, I am sure that my low opinion reflects the intention of the film-makers.

<sup>400</sup> Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol*, p. 65.

In contrast, Stevens uses Trina in such a way that we care little for her. She never comes to life, remaining a function of the plot, of interest chiefly for her influence upon Roger and Julie. Crucially, the six-year old Trina is defined by her lack of affect.

This is partly achieved through making Kuney's two scenes *about* performance, and thus focusing us on her shortcomings. The flashback opens with Trina, Roger and Applejack preparing the house for Julie's surprise party. This festive arrangement is quite unlike previous representations of the space, showing us the positive and playful element Trina has brought to the family. The living space becomes a playground as the three conspirators play hide-and-seek with a complicit Julie. However, while the protagonists are having fun, our awareness of Trina's fragile position in the household distances us from the proceedings.

The remainder of the scene is played at the dining table, as Applejack serves the party food. 'Dinner in my own home and I didn't have to cook it!' exclaims Julie, reminding us of the previous dinner table scene, in which Applejack convinced her to adopt a child and Roger half-heartedly assented. Trina announces her role in the forthcoming school nativity, the most explicit instance of the film verbalising the child's insubstantiality: 'Nobody sees me...I'm the echo, I'm away off behind the scenes...a faraway sound like angels in heaven.' As Trina turns off the lights to bring in Julie's cake, the film visually cues the tragic turn of events to come. A moment of celebration is pictured as a moment of darkness, and Trina's future as an angel is secure. The scene ends on a shot that looks down at the cake, a circular image that evokes the melancholia of the framing narrative.

Trina's ethereality is dramatised through her role in the school play. We see the family arriving in their car at the school, a shot that will be repeated after Trina's

death. As Roger, Julie and Applejack watch nervously from the audience, Trina tiptoes along a rickety walkway behind the stage scenery. Her steps are faltering, her feet in sneakers to quieten her tread. Hidden behind stage apparatus, the cloud she positions in the sky above the nativity, Trina pulls a stringed mechanism that brings the Star of Bethlehem into position. The scene has been staged so that she will be invisible, but her readjustment of the Star means her hand peeks out from the cloud, a moment of poignant amateurism. If this detail seems to me the only affecting moment that Trina has in the film, it is because it acknowledges her invisibility and her ineffectuality.

By framing a tracking shot around Trina's sneakered feet moving hesitantly along the walkway, Stevens encourages our expectation that she will fall. She does, pulling at the elaborate stage mechanism, ruining the performance of the religiously enshrined family, and sliding harmlessly back down the walkway. Like the scene at the dinner table, it takes us back to the period when Trina was only an idea, when Roger slid down the kid's slide under the amazed gaze of Miss Oliver. Behind the scenes of the stage, Trina finds herself under the disapproving glare of her teacher (costumed to resemble Miss Oliver, a witch to her fairy godmother). In the car home, Roger and Julie comfort their crying child, and the scene ends on an anticipatory piece of dialogue, with Julie saying, 'I don't know what we'd do without you, honey...' The echo of the previous flashback's final line ('Nothing can ever take her from us now') signals the film closing its circle, spinning back toward its framing narrative.

### **‘I’m not coming home.’**

The seventh, and final flashback shows the couple divided by the death of their child. As noted above, the child’s passing is communicated via ellipsis, in this case through the device of Miss Oliver reading a letter from Julie that reports Trina’s death from ‘a sudden, brief, hopeless illness’. In this section, I consider why the film presents such an important plot point in this way, and what it tells us about the central couple’s relation to society.

I have intimated that, through Trina’s lack of affect, and the characterisation of Miss Oliver as a ‘fairy godmother’, the film uses metaphors of magic and enchantment to address the couple’s parental responsibilities. Indeed, while *Penny Serenade* does not feel ‘enchanted’ (in the way that many of Cavell’s comedies of remarriage do), the whole of the couple’s relationship seems ‘directed’, as though the framing narrative device of playing music has conjured events. As I have shown, conversation (the premise of screwball romance) is forsaken in favour of affecting popular song, dream visions and narrative occlusion. Within this context, then, it is entirely appropriate that Trina should be ‘spirited away’ and that she should haunt the remainder of the flashback, and retroactively, our understanding of the framing narrative. This may seem dangerously close to Basinger’s claim that flashback narratives trap their heroines in a ‘restrictive present, in which all that matters is already predetermined’.<sup>401</sup> I hope to show that this is not the case.

The letter sequence is the film’s most sustained meditation on the question of agency. It opens with a shot of Julie’s pen writing the letter, which dissolves to Miss Oliver in her office inspecting the envelope and noting the return address of ‘Mrs Roger Adams, Rosalia Courier’ (note the self-definition, with husband and business).

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<sup>401</sup> Basinger, Jeanine, *A Woman’s View*, p. 198.



What follows are a series of point-of-view shots from Miss Oliver's perspective that allow us to read sections of the letter as she does. The letter describes the couple's helplessness during Trina's illness and the growing division between Roger and Julie: 'I've tried to talk to him, but he does not want to listen.' This account of non-communication privileges the female interaction of the letter, making Miss Oliver a confidante, more like a mother than at any other point in the film. Working in conjunction with a responsive non-diegetic score, the shared agency of Julie and Miss Oliver in directing the narrative is presented positively.

The use of dissolves to move the diegesis through time and space depicts a flashback-within-a-flashback. Like the scene of Roger and Julie's wedding, this opens with a shot through a rain-streaked window, in which the window slat divides the couple. Again, the home is constructed as a place separate from the outside world, something like a cage.

Roger and Julie sit either side of a fireplace, the domestic scene troubled by Roger's overwhelming silence. Julie watches him, unable to intervene upon his thoughts. A series of dissolves move between close-ups of Miss Oliver, Roger and Julie. Again, the film stresses the impossibility of knowing Roger, the dark shadows across his face seeming to emphasise Grant's potential to be threatening, even villainous. While a similar moment of great emotion (Julie's first tour of the Rosalia house) was depicted without dialogue, that sequence encouraged us to observe both Roger and Julie's emotional responses. In this sequence there is no movement. The couple sit fixed in their spots, frozen and drained of energy, and Roger's mood is impenetrable. The female narration of this sequence mediates these final scenes: the film will end with Miss Oliver enacting a *deus ex machina* that she and Julie seem to conjure.

In this flashback, so late in the film, the couple's inability to communicate seems hopeless. The door to the nursery banging in the wind rouses Roger, causing him to snap, 'I've got to get out of here, get some fresh air'. The house, and its memories, has become an intolerable space but Roger's attempts to leave are hampered by the arrival at their door of a woman and her son on their way to this year's school nativity. Their car has stalled and the boy is to play an angel; and as Roger and Julie drive them to the school, the parallels with Trina's role last year become unbearable. Stepping down from the car, the boy splashes in a puddle. This mis-step (in sneakers) is the final straw for Roger.

The flashback ends with Roger getting out of the car in Rosalia, leaving Julie to drive home alone. 'I'm not coming home,' he tells her and walks away, past a bar that gestures toward the city of night that looms as a possible destination for Roger's disaffection. The shot irises out onto a record of 'Together', and the couple's seemingly inevitable alienation make its lyrics an ironic comment upon separation.

The film returns to the framing narrative, as Julie replaces 'You Were Meant For Me' on the gramophone. The circular imagery of the irises and the 78s are echoed in this return to the movie's first song, giving us a sense of a coherent circular structure, and the 'memory' sequences as concluded. Applejack returns up the stairs and comments, 'These fool songs kinda take you back, don't they?' It is a line that recalls Noel Coward's witticism in *Private Lives*<sup>402</sup> about the potency of cheap music but with none of that dialogue's superciliousness. In this film, the 'fool songs' have taken us, and Julie, back, permitting an appraisal of the state of the marriage and the place of the child in the Rosalia home. Speaking of her records (and her marriage to

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<sup>402</sup> Coward, Noel, *Plays: Two* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 32.

Roger), Julie replies, ‘Funny, Applejack, I can’t seem to divide them. They belong to both of us. Guess I’ll just leave them.’

In this way, the film concludes on a partial and subjective note. Applejack recounts a memory of first meeting Julie at the newspaper offices where he had worked with Roger (a scene we have not been shown), another ellipsis that emphasises the construction of this Story of a Happy Marriage. Their conversation is interrupted by the return of Roger and the couple’s mutual admission that they do not know how to proceed.

In keeping with the film’s interest in the domestic space, and the particular emphasis on the space at the top of the stairs, Roger and Julie exchange their final goodbye in this transitional area. Indeed, Julie talks about Roger’s depression in spatial terms: ‘You’ve been miles away. I’ve been entirely alone, right here in this room with you.’ Assenting, Roger shares a memory with Julie, conjuring regrets over denying Trina an ice cream before she fell ill. Julie also regrets scolding the child – once again, describing memories to which we have no access, but constructing the marriage as something larger than the diegesis of the film, shared between the couple. There is no question of blame assigned to one or the other of the parents, they are ‘together’, the victims of misfortune.

Julie’s departure is halted by a telephone call from Miss Oliver. This turn of fate mobilises motifs of enchantment that have played throughout the film in relation to the child. We cut to Miss Oliver in her office, the return to the space of the letter-reading implying a visitation, as seen in the detail of a burning candle behind her. This flicker of hope rekindles the couple as Miss Oliver tells them ‘strictly off the record’ (a pun that links the playing of music to the intervention of fate) that she can offer them the guardianship of a child who matches exactly the specifications they

originally required: a curly haired, blue-eyed blonde boy, about two years old.

Naturally (or unnaturally) Miss Oliver describes him as a ‘very special child’; we might see him as a magical child.

Gratefully accepting the offer, Roger and Julie begin planning the redecoration of their home. Roger will put in a barrier at the top of the stairs to prevent the child from falling, reinventing this troublesome space as an area designed to protect the child from the hazards that constantly threatened Trina.

The film ends on an ambiguous note, as the couple walk arm in arm into the dark space of the nursery enthusiastically planning its redecoration. Trina is forgotten, and so, seemingly, are their deeper problems of miscommunication. We may take comfort in the fact that the couple are now talking together, not at cross-purposes though the sinister aspect of the darkness remains in our heads as the film ends. It is an abstract space, seeming to signal that the future cannot be foretold (it would have been very different if the camera had gone into the nursery as they laid their plans). One is also struck by the maleness of the child, and of the final line being Roger’s plan to buy ‘a little electric train’. The questions raised throughout the film of Roger’s responsibility, his capacity to educate and his connection with commerciality have not been resolved. In this way, the film seems unable to conclude with an image of a reformed domestic space, only the tentative gesture towards one. The film’s credits appear over the framed photo of the couple that began the film. Now the faces pressed together seem to be clinging, and the look rightwards confronts an unknown future. *Penny Serenade* offers us little reassurance of the viability of the romantic couple as parents. Most importantly, it cannot imagine the constructed family in a social setting. My second case study, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, moves a nuclear family out of the city into a reconnection with the American

landscape. On their way, they find that the land is no longer a home of their (or for their) Fathers.

### ***Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House***

Jim and Muriel Blandings (Cary Grant and Myrna Loy) are average. We are told that their experience is the experience of ‘thousands of other New Yorkers’. The middle-class parents of two daughters, they live in a Manhattan apartment with Gussie (Louise Beavers, Stella in *Shadow of the Thin Man*), a middle-aged black woman who cooks and cleans for them. Every day Jim goes to work at the advertising agency Banton & Dascomb. And somewhere along the line, their lives have become overwhelmed by routine.

As Steven Cohan observes, the part of Jim Blandings is an exceptional case in Grant’s post-war career. He groups it with *Monkey Business* (Howard Hawks, 1952, Twentieth Century Fox) and *Room for One More* (Norman Taurog, 1952, Warner Bros.) for bucking the post-war trend of portraying Grant as ‘single and sought after’.<sup>403</sup> Grant’s previous part alongside Myrna Loy, as the artist Richard Nugent in *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* (Sidney Sheldon, 1947, RKO), is exemplary. In that movie, Nugent’s glamour is apparent to every female that he meets, constituting physical beauty, social irresponsibility<sup>404</sup> and a kind of timelessness – both Loy and Shirley Temple’s character imagine Grant as a knight in shining armour. By contrast, *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*<sup>405</sup> insists that Jim’s unremarkable qualities, his conformity, make him a modern man. For Loy, the role of Muriel is not quite so great a leap. The significant film to quote is *The Best Years of Our Lives*, in which

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<sup>403</sup> Cohan, Steven, ‘Cary Grant in the fifties: indiscretions of the bachelor’s masquerade’, *Screen* 33: 4 (Winter 1992), p. 399.

<sup>404</sup> See Britton, Andrew, ‘Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire’, *CineAction!* 7 (December 1986), p. 37-51.

<sup>405</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Mr. Blandings*.

her performance as Milly is a culminating assertion of the ‘perfect wife and mother’ roles familiar from her films with William Powell. Unlike the part of Margaret (a judge) in *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*, Muriel Blandings has no profession that takes her out of the domestic space.

The film’s opening narration, and the connotation of ‘Blandings’, presents Jim and Muriel’s situation as emblematic of a larger social malaise. Ironically assuming the language of the public information film, the voiceover links the ‘discussion of contemporary America, and how its people live’ with the description of space. The bombastic declamation of ‘Manhattan! New York! USA!’ (punctuated by orchestral fanfare) is undercut by images of cramped commuters, frantic lunch counters and packed pleasure beaches. Thus, a description of the ‘fine wide boulevards [which] facilitate the New Yorker’s carefree orderly existence’ is accompanied by stock footage of a traffic jam. Similar comic opposition is deployed throughout the movie, which sets city against country, interior against exterior, past against future, and dream against reality. This is Lewis Mumford’s congested and wasteful megalopolis.<sup>406</sup>

These oppositional sites remain largely conceptual, and are seen through the prism of the Blandings marriage. So after this initial account of urban transit, the movie does not take its protagonists out into the city to meet any of its seven million inhabitants. ‘The city’ is taken to mean an alienated public space, a macrocosm of restriction (the Blandings apartment) and regulation (Jim’s office at the advertising agency). On the one occasion that we see Jim outside in the city, he is also inside: returning home from work in his automobile, framed within the frame of his

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<sup>406</sup> Mumford, Lewis, *The Culture of Cities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1940), pp. 237-243.

windscreen, and separated from his surroundings by the decision to use back projection.

The film dramatises an anxiety of disconnection from the social world, the fear that bourgeois existence leads to anonymity, or the erasure of one's self. Jim and Muriel's dream houses (their subjective desires are another of the film's oppositions) manifest a reconnection with society, a redefinition of the family, and ultimately a reengagement of mutual respect. The film's clarity regarding its central couple's relationship to a wider world is achieved through the narration of their friend and lawyer, Bill Cole (Melvyn Douglas). The initially unseen voice of the first scene is swiftly revealed to belong to Bill, who addresses the camera directly. 'I suppose you're wondering what all this has to do with Mr. Blandings and his dream house,' he says, his acknowledgement of narrative process establishing amused omniscience: narrator of, and character within, the diegesis. He acts as a self-proclaimed 'voice of doom', verbalising Jim's persistent self-doubt.<sup>407</sup>

### **Modern-day cliff-dwellers**

As in *Penny Serenade* and *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1947, Liberty Films), the living space manifests the small frustrations of daily routine. One domestic inadequacy physicalises the family's problems – in *Penny Serenade*, it was the door that stuck; in *It's a Wonderful Life*, the part of the banister that repeatedly came away in James Stewart's hand. In *Mr. Blandings*, high-rise living is dehumanising. The spatial restriction of Jim's morning rituals (he will later refer to

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<sup>407</sup> I am grateful to Ed Gallafent for noting a striking similarity between this film and 'How I Built my House'. Hardy, Thomas, *The Excluded or Collaborative Stories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 16-23.

the apartment as a ‘broken-down rat-trap’ and a ‘four-room cracker-box’) depicts ‘the triumph of the machine over human life’.<sup>408</sup>

Insufficient space is not, in this instance, a reflection upon financial status. On the contrary, feeling cramped is a symptom of being a bourgeois consumer. Compare my examples from *Penny Serenade* and *It’s a Wonderful Life* to the analogous moment in *Mr. Blandings* – Jim’s arm rising in reflex every time he opens the wardrobe to hold back an avalanche of hat-boxes. In this opening sequence, Jim’s oppression results from feminine colonisation of the living space. There is the pouffe at Muriel’s dressing table that he must step over to get to the window, the contortion of his body as he puts his arm into Muriel’s frilly gown and lifts his own off the floor with his foot, and the fact that his socks have been demoted from a drawer in the dresser to a lowly basket.

Jim’s resignation does not preclude resentment. The sequence begins with Jim trying to quiet the alarm clock and Muriel ensuring he rises by turning it back on. The camera follows his movement toward the kitchen, the smooth tracking shot taking in the whole of the apartment as he performs his morning itinerary: knocking on the bathroom door to alert one daughter, pulling the sheets off another to wake her, accidentally knocking the cover from the canary cage (the gender of the canary Theodore, its confinement, and its rude awakening are suggestive), returning Gussie’s broom, and collecting his orange juice and Muriel’s coffee. All Muriel can say is that she wished Jim would ‘make a little effort’ (she is still in bed), while his daughter will scold him for an oft-repeated error: ‘Father, just one morning, I wish you’d knock’. Everything contributes to a sense of thankless repetition. Little wonder that, when in

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<sup>408</sup> Gold, John R. and Ward, Stephen V., ‘Of Plans and Planners: documentary film and the challenge of urban culture, 1935-52’, Clarke, David B. (ed.), *The Cinematic City* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 61.



the shower, Jim will sing a song that celebrates a place ‘where never is heard / a discouraging word’.

The film often uses music to denote personal fantasy. Jim’s hearty rendition of ‘Home on the Range’ reveals his imagined utopian domesticity that contains civilisation within the great wilderness. Ironically, this takes place within the shower cubicle, a space antithetical to wilderness. When Muriel is in the shower, she too sings ‘Home on the Range’, suggesting not just repetition but that her satisfaction is equally at stake in this film.<sup>409</sup> The mist from the shower obscures Jim’s reflection, foregrounding the question of the self, both of character and of star. In *The Awful Truth*, ‘Home on the Range’ is, along with Oklahoma City and bad poetry, used to mock the folksiness of Dan Leeson (Ralph Bellamy) and to insist upon the compatibility of the estranged urban couple Jerry (Cary Grant) and Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne). That movie concludes with the couple leaving the city and travelling to a cabin in Connecticut, where sexual temptation leads to a renegotiation of the terms of their marriage along the lines of mutual trust. By invoking this song, and by so drastically altering the meaning it conveys, *Mr. Blandings* asks us to consider how a move to Connecticut may be different in the post-war world, and what it might entail for a married couple with two children.

### Mapping the house

Is it appropriate, then, to see *Mr. Blandings* as a comedy of remarriage? Anke Brouwers and Tom Paulus argue that *Mr. Blandings* is representative of a “domestic” period of the remarriage comedy’ in which the creation of a home generates the

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<sup>409</sup> Neither Jim nor Muriel sing more than the words of the title, though I have assumed (as, I think does the film) that the audience will know the lyrics that follow.

revitalising discourse between married partners.<sup>410</sup> They conclude that ‘real estate is not the subject of romantic conversation, it is a *partner* [sic.] in romantic conversation’ and that ‘as the threat of permanent divorce causes a renewal, a remarriage, so does the fear of losing the house’.<sup>411</sup> It is, however, difficult to accept that divorce is really at issue or that ‘a breach of trust is caused when both partners seem to want different things’.<sup>412</sup> Muriel and Jim’s fantasies diverge but both configure around the house.

Catherine Jurca argues the film is an endorsement of advertising at the time of America’s post-war housing crisis.<sup>413</sup> Noting the contemporary HUAC investigations, Jurca suggests that *Mr. Blandings* ‘advertise[s] itself and the project of filmmaking in general as scrupulously loyal to American institutions such as home and family and also as central to their production’.<sup>414</sup> Thus the reiterated images of the dream house articulate an opposition between sentimental/aesthetic and economic values:

Although the home has its sentimental genesis in an advertisement, he [Jim] turns to painting in an effort to detach the home from commercial interests. This artistic analogy consistently frames the Blandings’ understanding of their house and accounts for their failure to understand its economic value until the end of the film.<sup>415</sup>

Discussing the frequent allusions to American history, Jurca suggests that the ‘construction of the Colonial-style house doubles as an education in American culture and history’, the acquisition of which allows Jim to identify the importance of ‘his right as an American to own his own home’.<sup>416</sup> By reading *Mr. Blandings* as a

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<sup>410</sup> Brouwers, Anke and Paulus, Tom, ‘The mortgage the merrier: Hollywood comedies of remarriage in the age of domesticity’, *Film International* 4:22 (January 2006), p. 27.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>413</sup> Jurca, Catherine, ‘Hollywood, the Dream House Factory’, *Cinema Journal* 37: 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 19-36.

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

response to anti-Communist pressure, Jurca privileges ‘distribution and exhibition context’<sup>417</sup> and sees the movie as ‘the unique expression of a singular and singularly besieged industry, not of a particular studio’<sup>418</sup>. The broad sweep of this ‘studios-as-auteur theory’<sup>419</sup> permits Jurca to make reductive claims concerning the film’s ideological position.<sup>420</sup>

### **Very American, very grass roots, very blueberry pie**

At a difficult moment, Muriel will tell Jim that they are building the house for ‘the children, and the children’s children’. In Eric Hodgins’ source novel, these children are how Jim justifies his fantasy, observing,

Our generation is a failure with its children. A fifteen-foot horizontal slice in a New York apartment house – it’s preposterous to call a slab like that a home where kids can get any sort of reality out of their relationship to nature and society – or even their own parents.<sup>421</sup>

Jurca argues that the movie educates Betsy (Connie Marshall) and Joan (Sharyn Moffett), teaching them ‘that decrepit farmhouses are social opportunities for the middle class and not evidence of America’s social decay’<sup>422</sup>, and normalising their ‘strange precociousness’.<sup>423</sup> However, the film pays no attention to the daughters’ changed lives subsequent to leaving the city, never showing us their new school or new friends. The daughters continue to be distanced from their parents: Joan may

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

<sup>420</sup> Jurca omits discussion of Bill’s address to camera at the beginning of the film and consistently attributes the voiceover to executive producer Dore Schary. I have been unable to confirm the existence of an alternative cut, though Melvyn Douglas’ account of changing the script in his favour to make it a ‘comedy with comment’ makes this unlikely. Douglas, Melvyn and Arthur, Tom, *See You at the Movies: The Autobiography of Melvyn Douglas* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), p. 161.

<sup>421</sup> Hodgins, Eric, *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), pp. 27-8.

<sup>422</sup> Jurca, Catherine, ‘Hollywood, the Dream House Factory’, p. 23.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

solemnly proclaim, ‘The problems of the parents should be the problems of the children’, but neither party seems committed to such a union.

Once the house has been built, we never see the girls’ bedrooms, or a domestic scene of the family at rest. The film has no interest in the trend that William Rothman observes in Hollywood’s depiction of families in suburbia, which privilege the ‘traditional imperative of raising children in the “proper” environment, as if bringing up babies could be the only valid purpose of a marriage’.<sup>424</sup> Partly, this may reflect the diminished social possibilities that result from the private house in the country rather than the suburban estate. But equally, the film’s avoidance of these issues points us toward the way ‘the couple’ is separated from ‘the family’ in this film.



Fig. 10 The imagined home

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<sup>424</sup> Rothman, William, *The "I" of the Camera: Essays in Film Criticism, History and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 174-5.

The film presents numerous images of what the finished house will look like, each playing upon Jim and Muriel's gullible sentimentality for a reconnection with the authentic America. These images make advertising problematic – so that the magazine bearing the slogan 'Come to Peaceful Connecticut - Trade City Soot for Sylvan Charm' bears little resemblance to the actuality of the countryside, characterised as a perplexing, unmanageable space.<sup>425</sup> Jurca argues that the 'construction of the Colonial-style house doubles as an education in American culture and history'<sup>426</sup> but fails to note the ways in which the film portrays collective nostalgia as bankrupt and that the Blandings must demolish the old Colonial house to build a new one.

The film's final sequence answers these images, depicting the Blandings family and Bill at rest. We see an over-the-shoulder view of a magazine that Jim is reading, featuring the advertisement for ham he has been working on throughout the film. A photograph of Gussie, dressed in apron and toque, looks out from the page, and underneath is her slogan (an off-the-cuff remark which has been turned into a commercial property). The second shot begins as a close-up of Jim, who puts down the magazine and picks up a book entitled *Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House*. Taking his pipe from his mouth, he looks into camera and says, 'Drop in and see us some time'. The camera pulls back to show us that he is sitting in his garden with Muriel, who turns to smile into camera. Then Bill leans in from the right, reaching for tobacco to fill his own pipe, and adds, 'Yeah, do that!' The camera speeds backwards, so that we see the children running into the house ahead of Gussie, and 'The End' appears over a long shot of the property.

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<sup>425</sup> A similarly disastrous move to the country is depicted in *George Washington Slept Here* (William Keighley, 1942, Warner Bros.).

<sup>426</sup> Jurca, Catherine, 'Hollywood, the Dream House Factory', p.28.

Brouwers and Paulus suggest that ‘at this moment the film even feels unsure of its being a film’<sup>427</sup> but the assured movement between representational modes indicates the film’s formal self-awareness. We laugh at both the magazine advertisement (and at the way it has deployed Gussie, unconscious author of its slogan) and Jim’s address to us as consumers of his story. Jurca argues that ‘[a]dvertising is reinforced as both the economic and sentimental foundation of the home in the film’s final moments’<sup>428</sup>, and that this is achieved through the oppression of Gussie in the service of ‘the nation’s fundamental domestic units, the white family and its free-standing house’.<sup>429</sup> In effect, Jurca accuses the film of moral dishonesty, of eliding the construction of advertising and thus its manipulation of the consumer.<sup>430</sup> And yet, the comedy of this sequence relies upon our recognition of advertising as constructed, and our recollection of the ways visual images have been subject to manipulation throughout the movie.

Previously, Jim had imagined himself as the country gentleman, with a bloodhound at his side. In this final image, Jim’s satisfaction is linked to his comfort, as he sits down to a book and draws upon his pipe. His sports jacket and open-necked shirt denote affluence and leisure but also the casual, distanced from the hierarchical associations of his former fantasy - a middle-class landowner, not a feudal lord. And as the camera pulls back, we see that Jim is not dominant over a little kingdom, but is rather the central point of a shared space.

The sequence uses the vocabulary of advertising, and its mode of direct address, to affirm the happiness of the Blandings family. It is a utopian vision - Jim’s

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<sup>427</sup> Brouwers and Paulus, ‘The mortgage the merrier’, p. 29.

<sup>428</sup> Jurca, Catherine, ‘Hollywood, the Dream House Factory’, p. 27.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> I am particularly uneasy with the way Jurca uses inflammatory language to distort the politics of the film. By describing Gussie as a ‘virtual slave’ (ibid.), Jurca misses the point of the slogan scene: that the material for the slogan was at home, not in the office, and that within this setting, Jim’s adman’s ear begins to work again.

hospitable slogan, ‘Drop in and see us some time’, suggesting perpetuity. The move from printed page to the mise-en-scène of the family portrait adds to this effect, as does the ambiguous relationship to the preceding diegesis. This is domestic stasis of a



Fig. 11 The home as advertisement

different order to that depicted at the beginning of the film, in the Blandings apartment. The spaciousness of the exterior permits Jim’s offer of accommodation.

This is emphasised by the presence of Bill. His choral role throughout the film is employed here to affirm the legitimacy of the Blandings’ situation, his look out to camera signalling to us that this is the end of the story. However, Bill’s flip endorsement of Jim’s invitation, ‘Yeah, do that,’ and the way he leans forward so that briefly only Bill and Muriel are visible suggests that Jim’s happiness is still qualified by unresolved problems. In support of my pessimistic reading, I point to a telling detail at the extreme left of frame – Theodore may be out in the garden now, but he is still in his cage.

#### 4. Lover, come back to me: returning to marriage

*My Favourite Wife*

*The Best Years of Our Lives*

*Tomorrow is Forever*

Time may lie heavy between  
But what has been  
Is past forgetting.  
- 'I'll See You Again' (1929), words and music by Noel Coward

This chapter discusses narratives of return, in which absent partners come back to marriages after a period of time, prompting reunions fraught with the possibility of pain. The partner left behind may worry over abandonment while the returning partner must reintegrate into a society and a marriage that has continued in his/her absence. For both, anxieties over fidelity are at issue.

The narrative of couples parted, not by mutual discord but by external influence (shipwreck, war), has great melodramatic potential. In literature, a seminal example is Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*. The poem tells of Enoch, Annie and Philip, three friends from childhood who form a love triangle. Enoch marries Annie and she bears him children, one of whom dies in infancy. Enoch frequently leaves his family for years at a time as he travels the seas. After many years, Enoch is presumed lost. Eventually, after Philip's many kindnesses toward her children, Annie accepts his proposal of marriage. They have a child together. The poem then shifts attention to Enoch, who has survived on a desert island and is brought back to England. Discovering that his family has re-formed around Philip, he resolves not to disturb their happiness, confiding his story and identity only to a landlady on his deathbed.



The tragedy of *Enoch Arden* is that of frustrated reunion. However, two of the films I consider begin with reunion, recasting the following tropes featured in *Enoch Arden*:

1. *Domestic space*. The return-to-marriage film makes the home unfamiliar. I consider the terms with which renewed marriage is mapped onto the mise-en-scene of the home, and how a couple's future may become dependent on changes in the domestic space. The relation of the home to the wider society, and to places of work, is also important.
2. *Children*. The happiness and comfort of children is given great importance in *Enoch Arden*. Seeing their adoption of Philip as father keeps Enoch away. However, in Hollywood return-to-marriage films, children are a reason to reunite. The question then becomes, how does one become a parent again?
3. *Overseas*. Used as a symbol for death and Freudian rebirth, whether Europe or a desert island, 'overseas' is an unseen space, quite unlike 1940s America. The changes wrought upon the returning protagonist will influence the success of reunion. Understanding those experiences overseas establishes the couple's future.
4. *The other man/woman*. In *Enoch Arden*, reunion is forestalled when Enoch sees Annie and the children happy with 'Philip, the slighted suitor of old times'.<sup>431</sup> In return-to-marriage films, which assume the reunion of the original couple, the treatment of equivalent figures is revealing.
5. *The past/the future*. This is the structuring opposition of all return-to-marriage narratives.

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<sup>431</sup> Tennyson, Alfred, *Poems and Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 127.

I have argued in previous chapters that continuity structures our understanding of fictional marriages. How, then, does Hollywood attend to the troubling discontinuity of the narrative of return? In both *My Favourite Wife* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the future of the couple is made dependent upon an anomalous past. In *My Favourite Wife*, the absent partner has been presumed dead while the other has remarried. In *The Best Years of Our Lives*, the Second World War hangs over its couples, a past impinging upon their futures. In each case, the presentation of the couple's shared history appeals to a common film history: the period of absence is used reflexively, as a way of thinking about the Hollywood of the 1930s.

***My Favourite Wife: You and the night and the music***<sup>432</sup>

‘Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?’  
‘To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.’  
‘The dog did nothing in the night-time.’  
‘That was the curious incident,’ remarked Sherlock Holmes.  
(*Silver Blaze*)<sup>433</sup>

Enchantment is a key metaphor for love in Shakespearean comedy. A *Midsummer Night's Dream* concludes with one of its four lovers, Demetrius, still under the influence of a love elixir. After their night's adventures, Lysander will admit, ‘I cannot truly say how I came here,’ connecting romance with the experience of an enchanted space.<sup>434</sup> The conclusion of *Bringing Up Baby* makes the same connection, as David accepts his love for Susan because he ‘never had a better time’ than that spent together in the forest. The couple's pleasurable recollection of their enchanted night institutes their romance.

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<sup>432</sup> A song by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, premiered in November 1934, whose title closely evokes Peter's line in *It Happened One Night* about ‘you and the moon and the water’.

<sup>433</sup> Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes vol. 1* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 411.

<sup>434</sup> Shakespeare, William, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 102.

*My Favourite Wife*'s premise hinges upon a location (a desert island) that seems to invite enchantment. Yet curiously, in a film about the passing of seven years, there is no reliance on memory, no happy remembrance shared by the central couple. While the film occupies spaces of shared experience (e.g., the hotel where they spent their honeymoon), it never truly explores them. We are given no sense of what these places mean to the characters. The desert island becomes prosaic, a matter of longitude and latitude.

Compare the moment in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, Columbia, 1934) when Peter Warne (Clark Gable) lies back on a motel bed and dreams aloud. He describes a Pacific island that he has 'never forgotten', and imagines the woman who would share his paradise. This island's map co-ordinates are of no importance – the poetry of his dream is unaffected if he saw the island in life or *Life* magazine. What is important is that on the other side of a bedsheet, Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) listens to his innermost desires, and realises that she shares them. The island, a potent construction of Peter's memory, a projection of his future, casts its spell. Cavell writes,

That she is the woman of his dreams seems to me specifically announced in his recital of his dream, his expression of it, no more importantly by what he says than by his saying of it to her, in those circumstances. His invocation of 'those nights when you and the moon and the water all become one and you feel that you're part of something big and marvellous... Where the stars are so close over your head that you feel you could reach right up and stir them around' is of something he is wishing for all right, but more directly I take it as something he is recalling, their previous night together, in the open.<sup>435</sup>

Never mind that they spent this night in considerable discomfort, he annoyed at her hunger, she supercilious, then terrified at the thought of him leaving. Bickering is, after all, a Cavellian proof of marriage. By focusing on the act of recital, Cavell

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<sup>435</sup> Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 99.

explains why Ellie understands Peter's dream as a proposal. Words, the recollection of actions, act as enchantments. In this humble motel room, Peter has spoken for her.

The central couple in *My Favourite Wife* do not dream. Their relation to the world is utterly literal. Ellen Arden (Irene Dunne) returns from the dead but her homecoming takes on none of the metaphoric dimensions afforded her literary namesake. As she presents herself to her husband Nick (Cary Grant), there are no spectral flourishes on the soundtrack, no visual effects suggesting the intrusion of fantasy. Objects endure as mere objects, never taking on the connotative power of, say, the intercostal clavicle in *Bringing Up Baby*. In that film, the double entendres around David's 'bone' generate an absurd world that is nonetheless, through the continuing 'play between literal and allegorical',<sup>436</sup> full of psychological resonance. The world of *My Favourite Wife* remains unchanged by Ellen's return.

In *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*, nature's mystery and beauty is integral to the couple's union (you and the night and the music). As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the couples of those films appreciate enchantment after the fact. Recollection of their shared experience provokes romance.

What happened one night is that the man took the woman to his island. He carries her across a body of water that Capra's camera, in something like soft focus, shows so brilliant with reflected skylight that there seems no horizon, no break between the earth and the heavens, so that you feel you might reach anywhere and stir the stars.<sup>437</sup>

Cavell shows us that it is the very act of description that casts a romantic spell: just as Joseph Walker's cinematography has exaggerated the reflection of moonlight upon water and foliage for us, so too does Peter's speech enchant Ellie. Night carries no allegorical meaning in *My Favourite Wife* and this seems particularly strange when

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

the film moves to the mountains in its final act. It is as though the film goes to the green world without understanding what that entails.

Discussing *Bringing Up Baby*, Cavell describes David's haplessness as 'entrancement', brought about through continued exposure to the madcap Susan. He suggests that

[...] we should regard the midsummer's eve in the Connecticut forest not as the preparation for a wedding ceremony but as an allegory of the wedding night, or a dream of that night.<sup>438</sup>

David's enchanted night shows him that there are alternatives to the dictatorial Miss Swallow (Virginia Walker). Susan is exciting, unpredictable, frightening. It is these qualities that distinguish her from David's dull fiancée and which constitute Susan's charisma. As I shall argue below, *My Favourite Wife* offers a far more problematic vision of choice, one that fails to mark Ellen, and the Arden marriage, as exceptional.

Consequently, *My Favourite Wife* presents us with a problem of classification: it behaves like a remarriage comedy but aimlessly, as though it does not understand its own behaviour. The resultant loss of occasion connected to the wedding ceremony, manifest in two irritable courtroom scenes, supports a reading of the film that depicts marriage not as a Cavellian conversation, but merely as a legal contract. Nick and Ellen's first embrace in Yosemite must end by state ordinance; their final embrace in the mountains only takes place after parental and legal approval. It is as though the film is embarrassed of romance, and so determinedly insists that a Pacific island is just an island. By employing the devices of the comedies of remarriage, but draining them of their allegorical power, *My Favourite Wife* seems curiously unmotivated. Like the dog in the night-time, it does not bark.

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<sup>438</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

## Awful truths

From its opening moments, *My Favourite Wife* announces its reversal of gender roles. Although the personal pronoun of the title seems to align us with a husband's outrageous choice over competing wives, the emphatically feminised imagery of the credit sequence suggests masculine presumption overruled. Each screen credit is stitched onto handkerchiefs decorated with embroidered flowers, their succession effected by a female hand reaching in from left of frame, pulling away handkerchiefs from the pile. While this visual metaphor concisely states the radical nature of the film's premise (the returning partner is the wife, not the husband), it also embodies a recurrent, and problematic, strategy that the film will employ.

Conversation, explanation and the written word are persistently devalued in *My Favourite Wife*, which frequently has Nick attempting to describe the film's plot to a figure of authority and then giving in to embarrassed inarticulacy. As we shall see, the final scene of the film privileges unmotivated imagery over mutual conversation. Familiar tropes of remarriage comedies become a refuge from the radical implications of the gender reversal. Here, as later, the potential interest of *My Favourite Wife*'s title (how could such a choice come about, and what would be the criteria of selection?) is ignored in favour of pointing to (but not dealing with) iconoclasm.

Difficulties behind the scenes may account for some of the film's incoherence. Following the critical and box-office success of *The Awful Truth*, Leo McCarey had rushed another Grant-Dunne film into production. An automobile accident meant McCarey was unable to direct, so responsibility fell to the far less experienced Garson

Kanin. However, McCarey intervened during shooting, allegedly rewriting the third act of Bella and Sam Spewack's script.<sup>439</sup> At a narrative level, it is clear that *My Favourite Wife* intends to remind us of *The Awful Truth*, recycling not just the stars of the previous film but also key settings (courtrooms, athletic clubs) and situations (a move in the final act from the city to the country). *My Favourite Wife* was released in 1942; the missing seven years that are crucial to the plot take us back to 1935, which is to say to the beginnings of screwball comedy. So one of the film's implied concerns is with the way that comedy has changed over this period of time, or, to use the parlance of *The Awful Truth*, how things are 'the same but different'. Richard Schickel's suggestion that *My Favourite Wife* betrays 'a feeling that the writers and the director are breathing just a little too hard as they push an almost prehistoric rock uphill'<sup>440</sup> does not accommodate this reflexivity. Nor indeed does it acknowledge that the gendering of this plot, in which a woman returns not just to a remarried husband but also to children she does not know, demands a kind of hysteria in its telling.

Consider the absurdity of its premise: that Ellen Wagstaff Arden, leaving behind her husband and two infant children, sailed from America on an anthropological expedition and was lost in a shipwreck off the coast of Indonesia; that after a strenuous search, her husband Nick gave up hope, not knowing that she had survived the disaster and washed up on an island with Steven Burkett (Randolph Scott); that on his journey back to America, Nick met Bianca (Gail Patrick) and fell in love with her. Seven years pass - time spent ambiguously for both couples - and the movie begins in a civil courtroom as Nick petitions for Ellen to be declared legally dead, so that he may marry Bianca.

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<sup>439</sup> See Bogdanovich, Peter, *Who the Devil Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 418-20 for McCarey's account.

<sup>440</sup> Schickel, Richard, *Cary Grant: a celebration* (London: Pavilion, 1998), p.77.

Insistent ambiguity over the characters' sexual relationships forces the plot into inexplicable contrivance. This is not at issue in the more conventionally gendered *Too Many Husbands* (Wesley Ruggles, 1940, Columbia), which has Bill Cardew (Fred MacMurray) returning to find his wife Vicky (Jean Arthur) remarried to mutual friend Henry (Melvyn Douglas). Clearly, both men have sexual knowledge of Vicky, and the film can end on a delicious note of uncertainty, as she dances with both of them. *My Favourite Wife* performs narrative acrobatics to avoid confirming that the 'bad couples' (Grant and Patrick, Dunne and Scott) have slept with each other. Strain is especially apparent with regard to Steven's sexual conduct on the island. Our adult comprehension of the situation is confounded by the film's self-conscious nods toward the Production Code. Steven tells Nick that he 'has nothing to worry about in that regard' and Ellen assures him that Steven was 'a perfect gentleman'. Like Nick, we don't believe them. But the film seems to.

To convince Nick of her innocence, Ellen presents an unassuming shoe salesman as Steven. Her meaning is clear, that it is inconceivable that she could sleep with somebody who looked like *that*. This false connection between physical presence and sexual activity is crucial to the film's presentation of Steven as a rival. Steven's agility and beauty torment Nick, appearing as a superimposed miniature in his office. Narrative acrobatics are physicalised, as though the statement of incoherence removes it.

### **Being Beastly to Bianca**

The values of a narrative of return become clear when we examine the treatment of the other man/woman. Tennyson's sympathetic writing of Philip supports the melodramatic inflection of the poem, making Enoch's flight from



reunion explicable. Bianca and Steven's nominal roles as alternative partners (largely negated by the implicit reconciliation necessitated by the Arden children) become significant considering the inequality in relative star values between Gail Patrick and Randolph Scott.<sup>441</sup>

Given the inheritance from *The Awful Truth*, it is instructive to compare the equivalent characters in that earlier film: Dan Leeson (Ralph Bellamy) and Barbara Vance (Molly Lamont). It is typical of *My Favourite Wife*'s process of gender reversal that more screen time is devoted to Bianca, Ellen's replacement, than to Steven, Nick's rival. However, in *The Awful Truth*, screen time afforded corresponds to sympathy of presentation. Despite being gauche and dominated by his mother, Dan Leeson is charming and genuinely smitten with Lucy. Barbara Vance is, in her one scene, imperious and humourless. Crucially, both are fiancées. In each case, we are reassured by a sense of how their lives will continue post-rejection, Dan galloping back to Oklahoma, Barbara preserved within the rarefied Vance mansion. By contrast, save for a brief telephone conversation with an unseen mother, Bianca is quite alone, an abandoned bride. We never get a sense of where she has come from or her future prospects, and for most of the film she is confined within spaces that would be conjugal, were it not for the absence of her new husband. If, as I have suggested, our sense of the central couple's happiness is determined by the treatment of their other partners, it is a problem for the film if Nick begins to look like a cad, even more if he looks a fool.

The film's opening courtroom scene permits an exposition of the film's unlikely premise, but also demonstrates its confused presentation of Bianca. Nick (both lawyer and witness) attempts to explain Ellen's disappearance to the confused

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<sup>441</sup> It is important to note that while Grant and Dunne had starred together in *The Awful Truth*, Dunne and Scott had also been romantically teamed in *Roberta* (William A. Seiter, 1935, RKO) and *High, Wide and Handsome* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1937, Paramount).

Judge Bryson (Granville Bates), whose authority is compromised both by the irresolution of the preceding case and by the clerk (Earle Hodgins) whispering clarifications into his ear. As with Steven's acrobatics, the film dramatises inarticulacy by asserting the difficulty of describing its own plot, presenting these convolutions as a comic virtue. Witness the composition that places Nick at left of frame, Judge Bryson at right, and between them the figure of Bianca, distanced not just through perspective but also through her unconcern with the proceedings at the bench.<sup>442</sup> Setting the camera behind the judge's bench shows us the men's prevarications over the relevant pages of the brief within a space that is cluttered and failing (the numerous bottles of pills), in contrast to the assured female hand controlling the credits at the beginning of the film. Ellen, the unseen subject of the



Fig. 12 The diminished other woman

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<sup>442</sup> McCarey suggests that Gail Patrick's own training as a lawyer added another comic level to this scene. Bogdanovich, Peter, *Who the Devil Made It*, p. 419.

scene, undermines the male world of bureaucracy but also diminishes Bianca – curiously uninvolved in this moment crucial to her future – both figuratively and visually.

More than that, Bianca's vanity has a deleterious effect on the proceedings, as the reflection from her pocket mirror blinds the judge and prompts him to recommend that she 'wash her face instead of paint it'. It is particularly striking that glamour and an ability to irritate authority figures are, in Bianca, presented as negative qualities. Her affectionate yet repressive gesture, drawing Nick back from his advance toward the bench, begins the scene, which ends with Nick quietly deploring her sarcastic comments to the judge. Her failure to win Bryson over recalls equivalent situations in Hollywood comedy where a judge is charmed by wit or whimsicality - the scene between Irene Dunne and Paul Stanton in *The Awful Truth* is, I think, an intended comparison. That scene ends with Lucy Warriner (Dunne) winning custody of the shared dog Mr. Smith, a victory over her husband Jerry (Grant). Here, Nick marries Bianca, occasioning no joy whatsoever. It is as though the film has failed to find an appropriate comic register, and settled for a sour tetchiness. Judge Bryson disaffectedly officiates their marriage ceremony without looking at them, unwilling to see them as a couple. 'That's very sad,' he intones repeatedly.

Had this film been a story of bad marriage prevented, like *Bringing Up Baby*, we might have expected a characterisation of Bianca as tough or calculated, somehow incompatible for Nick. *My Favourite Wife*'s problem is that it begins with a bad marriage, and then fails to account for Ellen's superiority over Bianca. Narratives of return insist that there cannot be happiness for everyone and, in comedy, this is palatable when the 'other' man/woman is shown to be an unsuitable partner. As the film goes on, poor Bianca seems like a victim.

### **‘Is that Johnny Weissmuller?’**

Similarly incoherent is the failure to explain what happened between Ellen and Steven on the desert island. To answer such a question adequately would overstep PCA guidelines, and the film’s ambiguity is compensated by making Nick’s jealousy hysterical.<sup>443</sup>

The Pacific Club represents a fashionable simulacrum of the desert island fantasy. As a location, it implies that while Ellen and Steven ran barefoot as Adam and Eve in their private paradise, the city insists upon public display. The significance of the club’s name draws our attention to this question of publicity. When Nick failed to find Ellen in the Pacific Ocean, he came back with Bianca. Now, he easily tracks Steven to the Pacific Club, driven by a concern over his reputation. What he finds in Steven, what so unsettles him, is a mirror image.

Bianca and Steven occupy quite different narrative roles. As we have seen, the film steers a dangerous course in trying to characterise Bianca as unsympathetic by making her inexplicable. Steven, on the other hand, reflects and amplifies Nick’s self-doubt. On his honeymoon, Nick’s uncertain role as husband to two wives was illustrated by pageboys calling out his name at Bianca’s behest. At the front desk of the Pacific Club, Nick tries the same trick and the page leads him directly to Steven, sitting poolside with two women. Confident, virile, unencumbered by legality or anxiety, Steven displays his skill on the diving board and rope swings before diving into the pool. Struck speechless by Steven’s charisma, Nick can only applaud along with the other patrons of the club.

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<sup>443</sup> In response to an early draft of the script, the PCA remarked, ‘the entire story has, in our judgment, a definitely unacceptable flavor that is certain to be offensive to motion picture patrons everywhere’. Letter from Joseph I. Breen to J. R. McDonough, 24 November 1939. MPAA files for *My Favourite Wife*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

As Steven swings upon the ropes, Emil Waldenteufels' *Les patineurs* (The skater's waltz) plays on the soundtrack. The music exaggerates the grace of Steven's physical feat, but also his artful awareness of an audience. Compare this to the way cartoon-like sound effects have accompanied Nick's slapstick moments elsewhere in the film. Gehring suggests that Nick's association with the urban has a castrating effect in this scene, that 'the city decreases masculinity'.<sup>444</sup> More than this, the moment delineates two extremes of masculinity, within which Nick must find a happy medium, to be achieved in the film's final scene. What is interesting is that this index is drawn up through interaction with the 'other man', rather than through conversation with one's wife.

Gehring's description simplifies this male interaction. It is not quite that Nick is castrated, rather that he is made an unwilling spectator to Steven's performance, forced to look, through his association with Steven's admiring female audience. The film assumes we recognise Steven's extra-textual signification as the film star Randolph Scott, his costume recalling 1930s photo spreads of Grant and Scott, former roommates, as bachelors at play.<sup>445</sup> Steven's physique prompts two middle-aged women to wonder if Steven is Weissmuller, conjuring an uncomfortable picture for Nick: of Steven and Ellen/Adam and Eve/Tarzan and Jane playing house in the jungle. Again, there is a point being made about stability of identity: Nick (and Grant) knows just who is on the diving board, even if the two ladies don't.

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<sup>444</sup> Gehring, Wes, *Leo McCarey and the Comic Anti-Hero in American Film* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), p. 178.

<sup>445</sup> See Bego, Mark (ed.), *The Best of Modern Screen* (London: Columbus Books, 1986), pp. 112-113 for one example. The shoot, from September 1937, is pleasingly entitled 'Batching It'.

## Hamburgers and root beer

The Arden children represent the strongest break from the screwball tradition of the thirties. Noting that screwball couples rarely have parents or children, Glitre argues that their marriages tend to dismiss procreation in favour of exploring ‘the autonomous individual’:

The absence of procreation in these films directly relates to the cultural transition from the family-based patriarchal marriage to the couple-oriented companionate marriage. The absence of the mother could also signal the diminished influence of the domestic sphere, allowing the heroine into the public domain beyond the conventional space of gender destiny.<sup>446</sup>

Glitre suggests that *My Favourite Wife*, a film with two children and a mother (Ann Shoemaker), is an exception that proves her rule. Despite acknowledging that the project of the movie is ‘the reformation of the original couple’<sup>447</sup>, Glitre emphasises the absence of recrimination cast upon Ellen’s actions:

What is particularly striking, however, is that this wife with two infant children left home in the first place. Her decision to take part in the three-month anthropological expedition, as photographer, is explained by Nick: ‘She needed a change...she had a tough time with the children – teething.’ In other words, there is more to Ellen’s life than domesticity, but ultimately her only punishment for this ‘transgression’ is seven years in Eden.<sup>448</sup>

While there is no censure of Ellen – neither Tim (Scotty Beckett) nor Chinch (Mary Lou Harrington) seems to have suffered for their mother’s absence - it is important to the film that she works hard to become a parent once more. By focusing Ellen’s return home around the reunion with her children, the scene applies sentimental weight to the prospect of the remarriage. It is clear that family life has continued in her absence without upset or trauma. The joke about ‘teething’ is never more than a joke, and Ellen’s leaving remains a random act.

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<sup>446</sup> Glitre, Kathrina, *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: states of the union 1934-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 53.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

We might compare the film's careful avoidance of this aspect to melodramatic inflections of the same situation. In *All I Desire* (Douglas Sirk, 1953, Universal), a mother's return to her family is greeted with these words from her daughter: 'We aren't your family, and you aren't our mother.' The absence of any such criticism of Ellen is at once a symptom of the distinction between comic and melodramatic modes (i.e. it's not there or it takes over the movie), but also related to the ages of the children. In *All I Desire*, the daughter is an adult, who has had to take on the duties of her errant mother. In *My Favourite Wife*, the children are too young to have missed Ellen when she went, and still young enough to accept her now that she has returned.

In chapters 2 and 3, I have argued that parents who spend time solving mysteries or building houses are let off the hook by the presence of a mammy figure. There is no such person in this film - only a briefly seen Japanese male domestic - and so Nick's mother is, we assume, the only female presence for the children. Repeatedly, the film has Ellen congratulate Nick on his raising of the children, ensuring that we do not consider him neglectful. The vagueness of the domestic arrangement with his mother allows the film to push her aside in order to make room for Ellen's reinstatement.

The children function more as a symbol for Ellen's uncertain status as a citizen. She returns hitch-hiking in a truck. Her sailor's clothes display her social and sexual ambiguity, allying her with the truck driver (Horace McMahon) and contrasting the circumstances of her arrival with the bourgeois symbol of patriarchal possession, the post-box marked 'N. Arden'. The poignancy of seeing her babies grown, and not being recognised by them, is established as a way of making them represent the routines of domesticity to which she must return. Chinch, the little girl, tells Ellen that every Easter, Nick takes his children to lay flowers at their dead

mother's grave. Then they go out for hamburgers and root beer. Again, the absolute lack of trauma experienced by the children is emphasised (Tim thinks of his dead mother as a heroine). This bathetic move, from the graveyard to the diner, from the melodramatic to the mundane, summarises Ellen's journey in the film, from transgression to submission.

The point is made economically at the beginning of the scene when Ellen is immediately recognised not by her children but by the family dog Corky. But this is the last we see of him, and his absence throughout the rest of the movie speaks to an espousal of the duties of motherhood over the pleasurable distractions of the screwball dog.

#### **'It's like a miracle.'**

The film's final scenes reunite the couple through allusion to remarriage comedy. As in *The Awful Truth*, a wife conspires to be with her estranged husband in their mountain retreat, but in *My Favourite Wife* we never understand what the green world means to the Ardens. Having the children along means that Nick and Ellen must define their roles as parents before they can determine their own relationship. The film contrives to have the children overhear Ellen and Nick discussing how to make the announcement. In this way, parental responsibility is elided: without anxiety or trauma, the family unit recommences. For Ellen and Nick, the green world represents not a retreat from society, but reintegration into it: Nick's mother calls Ellen to sanction the reunion with Nick, and to assure her that the patriarchal figure of Judge Bryson does too.

The mother-in-law explains that the judge has ruled that Ellen is legally alive, and thus Nick's legal wife once more. This, she says, allows them to 'pick up where



they left off' in their previous married life. That the film considers this desirable exemplifies the departure from remarriage comedy. Let us compare the equivalent speeches made by the Grant character in each film, explaining himself as he looks down at his recumbent wife.

Jerry in *The Awful Truth*: [Y]ou're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've been a fool...but I'm not now. [...] So long as I'm different, don't you think that...well, maybe things could be the same again...only a little different, huh?

Nick in *My Favourite Wife*: Aw, look Ellen, what's the use? You know how I feel. I could go on thinking about it til Doomsday. I'm stuck. I don't care what happened, I don't care what people say. I was always mad about you and I always will be. Does that help any?

What seems crucial to the first speech, and entirely absent in the second, is the sense of an educative process. Jerry is contrite, desiring Lucy's forgiveness. But Nick describes a revelation that society's opinion of their marriage is not as important as their own mutual passion. In renouncing the act of 'thinking', Nick's speech stands in stark contrast to the philosophical wordplay of *The Awful Truth*. *My Favourite Wife* emphasises Nick's ability to *act* like a husband. While Jerry's speech leads to Lucy's forgiveness, Nick's has him sent back out of the room. His question, 'Does that help any?' is presented as a sign of his inadequacy, but this is also an inadequacy of the film. Nick and Ellen's reunion has nowhere to go. Jerry and Lucy are starting a new adventure.

Nick wins over Ellen not with words, but through his reassertion of autonomy. Following his unsuccessful speech, Nick is sent back upstairs with the thought that if he takes his 60-day cruise, then he will not see Ellen until Christmas. After rooting around up in the attic, he descends in Santa costume. It is a supremely odd moment, anticipated on the soundtrack by 'Jingle Bells'. Ellen cocks her head, almost as though she hears the non-diegetic music. The unexpected imagery, and the

uncomfortable conjunction of Santa with sexual reconciliation,<sup>449</sup> suggests a transferral of authority. Earlier Ellen has treated Nick like a naughty child, here he takes on the role of father (dressing up as Santa).

Most significantly, the scene rejects conversation as a means of bringing the couple together. Nick enters the room with a ‘Ho, ho, ho,’ and mischievously pulls down his beard. Cut to Ellen laughing and snuggling down into the bed. The final shot of the movie has Nick advancing to get into bed with his wife. The word ‘Goodnight!’ is superimposed as festive bells ring on the soundtrack, ending the film on another strange note. Movies do not end like this.

In *My Favourite Wife* (and my discussion above), the real ghost is not Ellen, but the memory of its predecessor, *The Awful Truth*. Concluding with ‘Goodnight!’ is perhaps the clearest example of this, and of the vast difference, in intention and achievement, between these two films. For while a written ‘Goodnight!’ in *My Favourite Wife* suggests an end to this couple’s dialogue and a self-congratulatory farewell to the audience, the repetition of a spoken ‘Goodnight!’ in *The Awful Truth* offers far less comfort. Andrew Klevan’s description of the ambiguous qualities of Dunne’s voice emphasises the depth of meaning available to this one word.

It is conclusive, curt – surely, you must curtail this exchange? It is sexually alluring, tantalising – surely, you are not prepared to curtail this exchange? It is a touch shaky, hesitant – surely I should curtail this exchange?<sup>450</sup>

It is also a repetition, Lucy enjoying the perpetuation of Jerry’s hesitation at the threshold of the marriage bed. The comedy of remarriage assumes ongoing

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<sup>449</sup> Perhaps I am just showing my naïvety. The Javits, Springer and Ebb song *Santa Baby*, written 13 years later, would certainly seem to suggest so.

<sup>450</sup> Klevan, Andrew, ‘Notes on teaching film style’ in Gibbs, John, and Pye, Douglas (eds.), *Style and meaning: studies in the detailed analysis of film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 222.

dialogue and education. Sadly, *My Favourite Wife*'s anxieties over masculinity prohibit any such conclusion. This is the price of its allusion.

### ***The Best Years of Our Lives: coming home***

*The Best Years of Our Lives*<sup>451</sup> is the story of three servicemen (an airman, a soldier, a sailor) who meet returning to their mutual home, Boone City. Their paths continue to cross as each man struggles with domestic and social reintegration in peacetime. Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), who spent the war looking through a bombsight, returns to limited job prospects and a wife he hardly knows, Marie (Virginia Mayo). Meanwhile, Al Stephenson (Fredric March), sergeant in the Pacific, kicks against the complacency of his position at the bank and the comforts associated with his tolerant wife Milly (Myrna Loy) and two grown children who are 'like strangers'. Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), who lost his hands when his ship was torpedoed, fears the terrible effect his disability will have upon his family and his childhood sweetheart Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell).

Each of the servicemen returns to a home made strange in his absence. Each wins a personal victory over the course of the film, finding peace in peacetime. The film's tentative happy ending offers us two new couples. Homer exchanges vows with an adult Wilma, no longer 'just a kid'. As this ceremony takes place, an exchange of looks (like a secret marriage) passes between Fred and Peggy (Teresa Wright), Al and Milly's daughter. *Best Years* presents these marriages as building blocks for the new America, a way of maintaining contact between different social classes brought together by war.

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<sup>451</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Best Years*.

The film makes the heterosexual couple the basic unit of American life. In his first sober conversation with Peggy, Fred almost immediately asks if she is married. When she answers in the negative, he responds with, ‘Must have been engaged though?’ It is the first instance of his interest being reciprocated – Peggy lowers her eyes and suggests that ‘all the best ones are already married.’ My discussion of the film draws upon this projection of the historical moment onto the state of marriage, its sense that something has passed and that something new is happening. *Best Years* proposes a series of alternatives for how couples might exist in this new post-war world, and how they might negotiate their pasts in order to create a future.

### **Hollywood realism and deep focus**

*Best Years* is usually discussed as a document of post-war America or as an example of aesthetic innovation. Each of these discourses elevates the film over a typified “conventional” Hollywood product. In 1948, the film’s script-to-screen process was used in the CBS radio documentary *The Hollywood Picture* as an exemplar of ‘the Hollywood product at its best’.<sup>452</sup> Hyperbolic terminology of this kind runs through the film’s marketing<sup>453</sup> and reception. James Agee’s two-part review for *The Nation* is headed ‘What Hollywood Can Do’, taking the film’s aspirations to social commentary as a way to define the limits of studio film-making. One of the challenges of writing about *Best Years* lies in reconciling its social voice with the mobilisation of Hollywood genre tropes.

This tension was noted, and generally deplored, by the film’s champions and its detractors. Agee’s criticism of the film’s ‘patness, its timidity, its slithering attempts to pretend to face and by that pretense to dodge in the most shameful way

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<sup>452</sup> Lyon, Peter, ‘The Hollywood Picture’ in *Hollywood Quarterly* 3: 4 (1948), p. 342.

<sup>453</sup> One poster proclaims, ‘The Screen’s Greatest Love Story is the Best Film This Year From Hollywood!’

possible its own fullest meanings and possibilities'<sup>454</sup> is tempered by his assumption of 'the writer's knowledge of all that he would have to go easy on as a part of the rather remarkable bargain by which he got away with all that he managed to'.<sup>455</sup> In particular, Agee describes the film's comic and sentimental situations as concessions to (an implicitly vulgar) Hollywood commerciality. By playing Al's drunken celebrations as 'broad comic relief', Agee suggests the film masks its deeper implications from all but the 'psychologically sophisticated'.<sup>456</sup> This perceived concession, and others like it (the convenience of Butch's bar as meeting place, elision of the class difference between the servicemen, Marie's divorce of Fred, Al's triumphant speech at the banker's dinner), are, for Agee, 'limitations which will be inevitable in any Hollywood film', of which he considers *Best Years* to be an exceptional instance of its kind.

Robert Warshow takes a more vituperative stance in his essay 'The Anatomy of Falsehood'. Expanding upon many of the aspects that Agee found objectionable, such as a 'denial of the reality of politics' and the flattening out of class differences,<sup>457</sup> Warshow argues that the film cynically employs notions of American democracy in order to placate its post-war audience. Where Warshow departs from Agee is in his dismissal of the technical achievements of the film, characterising it as 'flat and boring, unless one is ready to accept its pretensions or to delight in its virtuosity'.<sup>458</sup> While Agee compliments Wyler's direction, Toland's cinematography and especially Teresa Wright's luminosity,<sup>459</sup> Warshow blames 'the limitations of the realistic

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<sup>454</sup> Agee, James, *Agee on Film* (London: Peter Owen, 1963), p. 230.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231-2.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>457</sup> Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience: movies, comics, theatre & other aspects of popular culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 129.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>459</sup> Agee, James, *Agee on Film*, pp. 231-3.

technique' for a lack of dramatic resonance.<sup>460</sup> He argues that the film's 'falsehood' resides in its reduction of every problem to one of 'personal morality'.<sup>461</sup> Of especial interest is his account of the film as 'an unusually clear projection of the familiar Hollywood (and American) dream of male passivity [...] in which the sailor's misfortune becomes a kind of wish-fulfillment, as one might actually dream it: he must be passive; therefore he can be passive without guilt'.<sup>462</sup> While male passivity is an important feature of this film, I disagree with Warshow's inference. It is guilt that motivates this passivity, and the dominant female who creates a space for it.

In a useful account of the production of the film, Martin A. Jackson describes pragmatic concerns of the film-makers that somewhat undermine the publicity machine's account of their 'bravery'. Goldwyn was 'stricken at the thought of using a real double amputee', his mind only changed when audience research revealed that 'people were indeed concerned about wounded veterans in that year and would probably react well to screen portraits of real wounded men'.<sup>463</sup> Similarly, Jackson notes Goldwyn's insistence that 'the film would not be an attack upon America or its institutions although Goldwyn accepted a certain amount of social criticism',<sup>464</sup> a codicil which Warshow might not find impressive.

While their emphases are different, Agee and Warshow both separate form and content, differing only in their degrees of appreciation. Agee applauds the formal innovations, where Warshow finds them banal. Agee considers the film's content benign, if redundant, while Warshow discerns a sinister intent. However, both condemn the film for its failure to honestly depict the post-war situation. Agee, at

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<sup>460</sup> Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 128.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>463</sup> Jackson, Martin A., 'The Uncertain Peace: *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)' in O'Connor, John E. and Jackson, Martin A. (eds.), *American History/American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1988), p. 151.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

least, patronisingly acknowledges the limits of expression available to big Hollywood studios. Warshow, like Adorno, seems to assume that any Hollywood product is inherently degraded. Neither critic adequately discusses the contribution of aesthetics, mise-en-scene or performance, relying on the screenplay as repository of the film's meaning.

In a famous analysis of film style, Andre Bazin argued that Toland's deep focus cinematography and Wyler's mise-en-scene approximate the human eye *whilst* drawing attention to parallel planes of action in single shots.

The real action is overlaid with the action of the mise-en-scene itself, which consists of dividing the attention of spectators against their will, of guiding it in the right direction, and thus of making them participate in their own right in the drama created by the director.<sup>465</sup>

It is tempting to use Bazin's thesis of visual manipulation as a way of justifying the film's sentimental narrative. Some critical appreciations of Wyler as a technician adopt this strategy, praising his collaboration with Toland in terms that make the film's story an irrelevance. Karel Reisz applauds Wyler's naturalistic tendencies, but (like Agee) suggests that Robert Sherwood's screenplay teeters between observation and contrivance: 'The problems are honestly stated and then arbitrarily resolved.'<sup>466</sup>

In each of these readings, the success of the film is measured against its relation to realism. Co-incidence, sentiment and comedy are seen as regressive influences, elements that assuage Hollywood money-men and slide social commentary past the psychologically unsophisticated. Politicising the film in this way diminishes it, not taking into account its rich engagement with genre, its moments of expressionism or its capacity to invoke complex emotions around difficult subjects. In the following reading, I argue against an attitude that defines the

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<sup>465</sup> Bazin, Andre, 'The Evolution of Film Language', Graham, Peter and Vincendeau, Ginette (eds.), *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks* (London: BFI Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 80.

<sup>466</sup> Reisz, Karel, 'The Later Films of William Wyler' in *Sequence* 13 (New Year 1951), p. 27.

Hollywood apparatus by its limits, and which assumes explicit statement to be the worthiest form of expression. Unlike Warshow, I find the film's reliance upon ambiguity and implication to be admirable, even noble.

I start from a position close to that of Hermine Rich Isaacs, who argues that Wyler's direction of *Best Years* demanded a suppression of his more expressive visual compositions. While this appreciation bears close comparison to Reisz's stylistic observations, Isaacs is careful not to malign the film for banality or lack of sophistication, but to highlight how the form of the film demands a particular set of decisions.

Wyler's task was not so much one of banishing such authentic elements as these [deep focus compositions] from his film vocabulary as of learning to use them sparingly and where they could do most good.<sup>467</sup>

Isaacs views realism not as an ultimate end or an unequivocal virtue but rather as part of the film's range. This allows us to view realist technique as a function of the variety of genres in play throughout the progress of the film. Wyler himself warned that expecting 'reality' from the film was problematic:

That is why people say they like the picture because it's so real. But don't misunderstand. A picture of reality alone is nothing. It is dull. Only when reality has been molded into a dramatic pattern can it hold an audience. When they say 'it is real' they are saying first of all – maybe to themselves – 'it is good'.<sup>468</sup>

My reading of *Best Years* sees the film's 'dramatic pattern' as a natural result of its ideology of integration. The cross-pollination of genres (the Hollywood idiom) allows the film to communicate far more than Agee or Warshow credit, the co-existence of melodrama and comedy (I do not take these to be pejorative terms)

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<sup>467</sup> Isaacs, Hermine Rich, 'William Wyler, Director with a Passion and Craft' in *Theatre Arts* 31: 2 (Feb 1947), p. 22.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-3.



reflected too in the film's 'odd assortment of veteran actors, bright newcomers and amateurs'.<sup>469</sup> *Best Years* values concord ideologically and aesthetically.

### **'All the best ones are already married'**

*My Favourite Wife* has shown us that the narrative of return is strongly gendered. However, *Best Years* offers a more complex ideological picture of male and female cooperation. Home (which has not just domestic, but patriotic, connotations) is predominantly associated with how females order it. On the flight into Boone, Al says, 'The thing that scares me most is that everybody's going to rehabilitate me.' The film portrays rehabilitation as a feminine responsibility. Milly must care for Al, tolerating his excesses and discontent. Wilma must demonstrate her mature understanding of Homer's disability (dramatised as assuming the father's role, putting Homer to bed). Most importantly, Marie's lack of sympathy for Fred's war trauma is compared to Peggy's nursing disposition, the latter signifying her suitability as partner for Fred.

We might reasonably ask, then, whether *Best Years* is conservative in its attitude to women. It is true that while we hear that Peggy and Marie work, we never see them *at work*. One might argue that the film demands that women renege on their wartime freedoms and revert to caring for men, rehabilitating them. However, this would only be the case if the film suggested marriage was the only tenable destiny for a woman. I shall argue below that the character of Marie presents the audience with an alternative model of femininity and that it is testament to the film's intelligence that it accommodates such a character without condemning her.

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<sup>469</sup> Jackson, Martin A., 'The Uncertain Peace', p. 152.

Romantic and familial relations are measured against the structuring friendship of Fred, Homer and Al. Importantly, this is not a friendship weathered by war, like that between Cliff (Guy Madison) and William (Robert Mitchum) in *Till the End of Time* (Edward Dmytryk, RKO, 1946). The three servicemen meet after demobilisation as they travel home to Boone, and are united by their shared anxiety over this return. Their camaraderie emerges from all being 'nervous out of the service', and fearing what awaits them.

By contrasting the men, each coming from a different branch of the service and from different class backgrounds, the film implies that their stories are representative of a larger national experience. It typifies the men as exemplary Americans *despite* their differences. Each represents an inflection of the same positive masculine values: bravery, comradeship, self-deprecation. Masculine friendship marks out the terms by which we are to judge the film's married couples - so much so that when the film puts the continuance of this friendship at stake, it is allegorically debating America's continuance.

### **Nervous out of the service**

*Best Years* begins with an image of America. The first shot of the film looks down on the floor of a commercial airport upon which is marked out a map of the country, criss-crossed by flight paths. Amidst a crowd of civilians, Fred (in air force uniform) hauls his travelling bag toward the flight desk, striding across the map as he does so. It is an image that concisely establishes the serviceman's return to a modern, unfamiliar America.

Throughout the film, Fred will be positioned uncertainly in relation to other people. He is frequently framed in groups of three, the tightness of Dana Andrews'

face manifesting Fred's feeling of being out of place. At the flight desk, Fred is told there are no planes that will fly him home. He then sees a rich businessman pick up his reserved ticket. While Fred has had to spell out his name to the desk clerk, the businessman announces himself as George H. Gibbons (Ralph Sanford), the vanity of that middle initial declaring confidence and financial status. Gibbons has had his seat reserved by a secretary, and a black porter now carries his bags to the desk. Fred looks blankly at the golf clubs, trophies of a world of leisure quite alien to him. The framing of the shot puts the camera behind the desk and the receptionist, with Gibbons left of frame, Fred centrally placed, and the porter to the right. Looking across the frame from left to right, then, we see ways in which American men can be divided, along lines of class, wealth, experience and race. Somewhat removed from



Fig. 13 Mapping America

that is the desk clerk, a female presence who, typically of the film, provides the male trio with order and information. The scene establishes Fred's peripheral relation to

this new society. He carries his own bag away to the ATC, while George H. Gibbons breezily pays for his 16 pounds extra baggage, watched by the black porter, mute at the sidelines of the frame.

This is not to say that Fred is made pitiable. At the ATC, the composition of Fred standing at a desk is repeated. Here, his reception is less frosty. Fred jokes with a corporal as though they were standing at a bar, and bluffs the (male) desk sergeant that he's got orders to return home. The corporal, trying to get home to Detroit, accepts passage to Cleveland. As with the map in the airport, alienation from post-war America is emphasised. The corporal might just as well go to Cleveland.

Homer sits segregated from this to-and-fro, seemingly unwilling to participate. When the desk sergeant calls out the name of Boone City, Homer lifts his travelling bag, revealing his mechanical prostheses.<sup>470</sup> As he signs his name, the framing of the shot once again invites comparison with the scene at the airport. Here, the sergeant's misjudged kindness, Homer's graceful response, and Fred's look at the sergeant create a sense of awkward unspoken camaraderie. The moment depicts a depth of experience and understanding shared by servicemen. This will be the basis of the comradeship between Fred, Homer and Al. As Fred and Homer leave the ATC building, they are talking about the other important link: their home of Boone City, orienting themselves by the known landmark of Jackson High School.

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<sup>470</sup> Wyler took many scenes of this kind (lighting a cigarette, handling and breaking a glass, firing a gun, drinking a malt) from the documentary that starred Russell, *Diary of a Sergeant* (Joseph M. Newman, 1946, Signal Corps Photographic Centre U.S. Army). This 20-minute film also dramatised Russell's reintegration into society, charting his halting romance with a girl he meets on a train, linking his growing aptitude with his prostheses to his sexual confidence. The short film contains many scenes in close-up of Russell's face, accompanied by internal monologue voiceover, spoken by another actor. *Best Years* contains a number of similar close-ups, which invite us to look at the face not just of Homer, but also of Russell.

In the B-52, they find a bleary-eyed Al.<sup>471</sup> Moving to the nose-cone, the space of Fred's war, they watch America pass below them. Fred jokes that they are travelling by roadmap. For Homer, who has never flown before, it is a beautiful sight. For Fred, who has flown too many times, it can never again be beautiful. This first indication of Fred's post-war trauma is dramatised as a difficulty in 'seeing' America, recalling the divided map of the airport.

### **You're home *now*, sailor**

Michel A. Anderegg suggests that the return to Boone alienates the three men from their spatial surroundings. Watching through their cab window, they excitedly observe the civilian populace on the streets. Family and community are linked by the commodity culture: we see a hot dog stand, a burger joint, signs for Coca-Cola and Woolworth, a mother pushing her pram, a fire engine, a used car lot, a railcar diner and a shine parlour beneath a billboard for beer. These homegrown spectacles are accompanied by a perky passage in Friedhofer's score, evoking the city's vitality.

A subsequent shot, from behind the cabdriver, frames them within an even smaller space, the taxi's rear-view mirror. This shot effectively cuts them off from the surrounding city life we see through the front windshield. They literally float in space together, isolated from the world around them.<sup>472</sup>

Significantly, the one location that does have a personal connection is not shown. Homer makes his companions look back at Butch's, a bar run by his disreputable uncle (we do not see its exterior). Accompanied by the look out the back window, this recommendation associates masculine space with the past, and by implication,

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<sup>471</sup> Fredric March's association with dissolution - most famously as Norman Maine in *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937, Selznick International Pictures/United Artists) - prepares us for his role as the banker who likes to go slumming. Dana Andrews, meanwhile, had previously played blunt, often brutish, men. As Mark McPherson in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944, Twentieth-Century Fox) Andrews declares, to the horror of sophisticate Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb), 'a doll in Washington Heights once got a fox fur out of me'.

<sup>472</sup> Anderegg, Michael A., *William Wyler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 129.

femininity with the anxious future. As the cab draws up to Homer's house, he will nervously suggest they return to Butch's.

Butch's bar is a locus symbolising a familiar, welcoming past. Therefore, Agee's criticism of the location as a 'device' strikes to the heart of the film. Working toward his definition of social realism, he suggests that the location is dishonest.

Perhaps one shouldn't kick too hard at a mere device, but I feel very dubious about the invention of a nice bar in which the veterans keep meeting each other, perhaps because I suspect that one of the dodged truths is that once they become civilians again, most men of such disparate classes or worlds would meet seldom, with greater embarrassment than friendliness, and that the picture is here presenting, instead of the unhappy likelihood, a hopeful and barely plausible lie.<sup>473</sup>

However, it is precisely the anxiety that such meetings would *not* happen which the film is addressing, the worry that veterans of disparate classes and experience would not be able to continue friendships in the civilian world. The convention of men falling hungrily upon a shared space is reproduced in other films (there is an equivalent meeting place in *Till the End of Time*), and for other wars. Far from creating an atmosphere of forced chumminess, it is a device that asserts the loneliness of the city for the returning serviceman. Outside of his immediate family, he has no other friends (a reminder of death, and of those who have not returned).

Homer, Al and Fred return to very different ways of life. These correspond with their class positions but also establish challenges that will face them throughout the movie. Each consecutive homecoming offers variations on the approach to the home and the ensuing greetings and embraces, constructing each serviceman's relation to the domestic space differently. For Mike Chopra-Gant, the structuring dichotomy of the film is between male camaraderie and the feminised domestic space,

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<sup>473</sup> Agee, James, *Agee on Film*, p. 230.

‘the primacy of the family over the all-male group’.<sup>474</sup> I wish to discuss these two elements as complementary rather than antagonistic. Homer and Al’s homecoming nerves are, to some extent, dissipated by the support of their male comrades (pushing each other out of the cabs).

The approach to Homer’s house establishes the film’s tropes of homecoming. In this case, the space of childhood is given a tragic inflection. After the jaunty theme that has accompanied the servicemen’s drive through the city, Friedhofer’s score slows down, evoking Homer’s anticipation. ‘This is my street,’ he says, and as the cab driver counts down the house numbers, our suspense builds. The unchanged landscape of residential America is set against the damage done to Homer’s innocence. One shot places the camera in the back of the cab, looking out of the window at the street from Fred’s point of view. We are positioned as comrades, worrying *for* Homer.

The following shot reframes Homer from inside the house, behind a screen door. His sister Luella (Marlene Aames) comes out onto the porch and, seeing Homer, sounds the alarm. After calling back into the house, she leaps over the hedge to the adjoining house, calls for Wilma and then runs back to embrace Homer. Luella’s movements are shown in one camera movement, panning left to right, and back again. Homer’s street is defined along a horizontal plane, the permeation between houses creating a sense of open community, of a home extending beyond one house. The white picket fence asserts a continuity of wholesomeness – Homer is part of a family of aged parents and a young sister. The ending of the scene presents reintegration into the family as dependent upon Homer negotiating his love for

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<sup>474</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 169.

Wilma. As the cab pulls away, Al observes that Homer could not be trained ‘to put his arms around his girl, to stroke her hair’.

Homer’s homecoming<sup>475</sup> shows us what Warshow describes as the reduction of problems to the personal. More constructively, we might reflect upon how Homer’s reintegration is presented as a problem of both marriage and community. How can he rejoin a world that seems unchanged when he has been so transformed? How can he marry the innocent Wilma when he harbours feelings of anger and self-loathing? Of Homer, Warshow writes,

His problem is at least quite clear, and the necessary moral patterns have already been established in a hundred movies: virtue for the sailor consists in assuming that his girl will marry him only out of pity and a sense of obligation; virtue for the girl consists in ‘really’ loving him, so that the loss of his hands can make no difference.<sup>476</sup>

These well-worn tropes of romance are, I would suggest, somewhat deepened by the undertow of bitterness that Russell invests in Homer. ‘Virtue’ is not presented simplistically. The film is brave enough to suggest that, for both Homer and Wilma, it can be a bitter pill to take.

### **‘You see, Al... My *husband!*’**

The difference between Homer and Al’s situation is one of camera placement. Both homecomings feature a shot of the taxi pulling to the curb. In Homer’s case, however, the home is seen through the taxi window, the end point of a view along the street. In contrast, a long shot shows us Al’s apartment building, set beside a busy road. Unlike Jim Blandings’ apartment, it is spacious and well appointed, not a home engulfed by the city but rising above it. As Al passes through the lobby, a snooty concierge asks him to identify himself. ‘What did you expect? A four-star general?’

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<sup>475</sup> The assonance here alerts us to the way Homer’s reintegration will be crucial to the conclusion of the film.

<sup>476</sup> Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 130.



asks Al. In contrast to the open spaces of Homer's street, Al nervously ascends in an elevator.

Hesitantly, he rings the doorbell, and is met by his son Rob (Michael Hall), then Peggy. He silences each of them with a hand across their mouth, reversing Luella's announcement of Homer's arrival. Hushing them in this way privileges his reunion with Milly. She is in the dining area, laying the table. In terms of Loy's persona, it is as striking an introduction as her spectacular fall in *The Thin Man*. After *Best Years*, Loy became far more aligned with the domestic routine.<sup>477</sup> Where we might have expected to see her waited upon in the 1930s, she now mucked in. As in *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944, Selznick International Pictures), the absence of a servant is a way of showing us how the wife's existence has changed in her husband's absence. She has become closer to the running of the home, truer to the 'womanly ideal' than her past (and Loy's previous roles) permitted. Domesticity is presented positively, allowing for the possibility of glamour.

Al and Milly's embrace is, like Homer and Wilma's, observed by a family and by us. However, the nature of that observation is somewhat different. While Homer and Wilma's embrace depicted the wall that Homer has built around himself, here the reunion is presented as a communion. The shot runs in one unbroken take, as they stop to take each other in, then are slowly drawn together. It is a beautifully judged sequence, the combination of action and music creating a sense of choreographed movement, almost of dance, a metaphor that will be returned to with regard to the couple's past.

It is a private moment and the film allows both the camera and the Stephenson children to respect this. As Al and Milly kiss, the camera holds the shot at the far end

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<sup>477</sup> See *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* (Irving Reis, 1947, RKO), *Cheaper by the Dozen* (Walter Lang, 1950, Twentieth Century Fox), its sequel *Belles On Their Toes* (Henry Levin, 1952, Twentieth Century Fox) and, of course, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*.

of the hall. Rob and Peggy disappear at either side of the frame, only to reappear seconds later. Like us, their respect for the couple's intimacy brings attendant fascination. The next shots show us the children's reactions, linking the audience's experience with theirs (distanced but involved) before cutting in closer to the embracing couple.

There is a great contrast to the halting reunion at Homer's house. Here, at least for an instant, it seems that *nothing* has changed, that Al and Milly will revive their witty and fulfilling pre-war union.<sup>478</sup> However, Al's awareness of his children's growth creates a strange tension. This is displayed as a visual disruption, what we might call the lack of a family portrait. While Al's embrace of Peggy takes place in a close three-shot with Milly (excluding Rob), his embrace of Rob is accompanied by a cut that moves the camera to a more distanced position (as Milly departs to the kitchen). Overcome with emotion and desperate not to show it, Rob hurries off with his father's bag. In a later scene, Rob's embarrassment and incomprehension at Al's gifts will show their emotional distance.

The scene ends on an uncomfortable note. Milly is calling up friends, in order to cancel their dinner plans. Flustered, she stumbles over her words, as Al looks bemusedly at Peggy. Al seems even more of a stranger, disrupting a social routine. His perplexed look wonders at this world of leisure apparently untouched by war, carrying on 'just as if nothing had ever happened'.

So far, the film has portrayed two comparable homecomings. Each has shown us the serviceman's relationship with the domestic space, with the relationship with

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<sup>478</sup> I am consciously evoking *The Thin Man* series here, justified by the couple's financial comfort, the casting of Loy and the passing resemblance between March and William Powell. At this moment, all we know of the Stephenson marriage is its duration and Al's anxiety over his return. Nevertheless, March's persona prepares us for the possibility of duality and heartbreak. My sense that the film intends us to remember his roles in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1931, Paramount) and *A Star is Born* is strengthened by the later moment when Al looks at a picture of his younger self (which is also March looking at a 1930s studio portrait of himself).

the girlfriend/wife the primary index of reconciliation between past and future, characterising these realms as the deathly world of war and the innocent world of children. These set up Fred's homecoming, which breaks this pattern in a number of ways.

### **Fred's return**

Fred is alone on his return. Where Homer and Al's homecomings had taken place under supervision, this scene opens with Fred walking through his neighbourhood as the cab pulls away. We have been given no sense of Fred's anticipation as he approaches his destination; we may take that to mean that he has had none. Of all three servicemen, it is Fred who (seemingly) has the least to worry about. He is a captain, physically unharmed, returning to his young and beautiful wife. However, the mise-en-scene of this homecoming alerts us to repressed difficulties.

Despite taking place outside, the scene is very dark. An oppressive flyover closes in the frame, quite unlike the spacious community of Homer's street or the busy road that passed by Al's apartment block. In the distance, a goods train clanks past, heading elsewhere. This is the forgotten America, passed by and left to rot, the America of the Depression. Fred wanders through the deserted area, stepping over discarded garbage. We begin to see how going to war might have been an escape, even an opportunity, for Fred.

Chopra-Gant uses this sequence to categorise Fred as a class "Cinderella":

This scene goes further than merely identifying Fred as working class; it denies him respectability or dignity as a member of the working class, using the characters of his "blowsy stepmother" and his alcoholic father who "lives in frowsy gin-reeking existence" (*Variety*, review of *Best Years of Our Lives*, 27 November 1946) to convey a strong impression of Fred's family as morally delinquent members of

that class, largely responsible for their own impoverished condition because of their personal weakness.<sup>479</sup>

Recalling Warshow, Chopra-Gant sees the film as resolving ‘the binary opposition formed by the different classes’ by mobilising a ‘vision of America as an egalitarian society by reinvigorating the myth of classlessness’.<sup>480</sup> However, by reproducing *Variety*’s descriptions of the family, Chopra-Gant fails to adequately describe the performances of Fred’s father Pat (Roman Bohnen) and stepmother Hortense (Gladys George). By reducing these characters to ciphers, Chopra-Gant simplifies the meaning of the scene. While Fred’s family circumstances may be unconventional and dilapidated, they are hardly ‘morally delinquent’.

When Fred enters the two-room shack, Hortense is transferring laundry from a basin onto a line that crosses the kitchen. Unlike Milly, who had to learn how to wash dishes after her maid left, Hortense has clearly done this all her life. Pat is drinking in the next room. It a ramshackle, functional space, where a picture frame is obscured by the stove chimney. However, its meagre hospitality is not condemned. Witness the warmth of Hortense’s greeting, and the way she speaks for Pat, who does not have the words for his emotions. These people may not have the luxury of sentiment, but that does not mean they are insensitive. Indeed, the film suggests deeper connections across class with the gesture of Hortense discreetly taking the bottle from Pat’s hand (Milly will do the same for Al many times over).

Homer and Al’s homecomings have delineated their spatial relationship to the home. Homer’s romantic possibilities are just across the hedge in the house next door, but his domestic life is claustrophobic and scrutinised. Al’s restlessness physicalises his discomfort with the role of paterfamilias. By contrast, Fred is shown

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<sup>479</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America*, p. 32.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

to have no attachment to Pat and Hortense's house. His ability to casually race off in search of Marie, with hardly a look back at his 'old man', defines Fred as the protagonist with least investment in his own past (his nightmares are an infliction of the past). We can guess that Fred grew up quickly, that childhood is closed off from him. Of the three servicemen, Fred has no space of his own, no bedroom and no sporting photos. He moves from Pat and Hortense, to the Stephensons, to Marie's flat, until he ends up with his family once more. Over the course of the film, Fred must resolve his uncomfortable relationship with the space he occupies. His eventual return to, and reclamation of, the airplane that was his 'office' allows him to go on to create a more acceptable space alongside Peggy.

I have argued that the relationship between the servicemen, and the repetition of groups of three, has been a way of structuring the relationships of the film. In the following sections, I look at the way the film presents its couples, and how it defines their relationship to the wider society.

### **Al & Milly: Among My Souvenirs**

Through one of those plausible coincidences to which Agee objected, the Stephensons happen upon Homer and Fred at Butch's bar that night. Throughout the film we see Al compulsively drinking, continually recharging his glass and searching for convivial allies. Playing Al's crafty drinking for laughs does not trivialise it, as Agee suggests.<sup>481</sup> Seeing Butch play a favourite tune for Homer, Al requests 'Among my Souvenirs', a song of special significance to the Stephensons. In keeping with the film's respect for their privacy, we never find out just what makes this song special. It is enough to know its romantic pre-war association, and that Milly is charmed by

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<sup>481</sup> There are many moments in the melancholic *A Star is Born* that make a joke of Norman Maine's alcoholism, as when he orders a scotch and soda while holding a full glass.

the gesture. As they dance together, we see Al's eyes closed in reverie, and Milly's full of emotion.

Dancing's expression of romance and nostalgia is swiftly superceded by its comic potential. When 'Among my Souvenirs' ends, 'Roll Out the Barrel' starts up and Al enthusiastically launches them both around the floor. 'It's nice to see the young people enjoying themselves,' laughs Peggy, as Fred tries to flirt with her. Unfortunately, he keeps forgetting her name, anticipating the following, potentially disruptive, conversation between Al and Milly.

As they dance together, Al suddenly pulls back, looking at Milly as if for the first time. Seemingly confused, he begins to talk about his 'little woman and two kids, back home'. Milly gamely takes on the role of the 'bewitching little creature', smiling tolerantly as Al dances her away. By presenting the question of infidelity overseas in this comic vein (a shift in emphasis signalled by the change of song), the film allows room for non-specificity. We cannot be sure to what extent Al is kidding Milly, especially given his earlier joke about Peggy being his driver. In this respect, a comparison with *The Thin Man* films is instructive. Those movies use Nick's sexual interest in other women as an index of his regard for Nora, contingent on our understanding that he has no interest in infidelity. Here we have no such assurance, but the humorous treatment allows the suggestion to get past the Production Code Office, and its vagueness allows us to speculate without confirmation.

However we choose to read Al's mistake/confession, Milly's acceptance is deeply moving. By couching her response in this way, the film allows infidelity to be present, if not exactly addressed. Later, Fred's sexual experience is suggested when he drunkenly pulls Peggy down onto him, in his well-practiced routine for waking up in a strange bed, and in the silence that meets Marie's question: 'What were you up to

in London and Paris and all those places?’ Each of these cases is permissible through a level of non-specificity, particularly in the way that assumptions are attributed to Peggy (‘I’m not *that* Peggy!’) and Marie, rather than confessed by Fred.

The scenes that follow, as Milly and Peggy take the snoozing drunks home and put them to bed, again position the women in nurturing roles. Milly’s undressing of her husband, and the sentimental kiss that is rebuffed, exaggerates her maternal side, just as Peggy’s amused rejection of Fred’s advances is balanced by nursing him through his nightmare. It is as though the film values these qualities over any sexual connection. Crucially, Al and Fred’s relationships with Milly and Peggy are presented in tandem, for us to compare (Peggy will do this literally later in the film). The homosocial relation structures the heterosexual, something that both Milly and Peggy accept (‘They make a lovely couple, don’t they?’).

### **Marie & Fred: ‘Nobody’s got a *wife* looks like that!’**

On their flight to Boone City, the difference between Fred and Al’s marriages was defined as the gap between 20 years and 20 days. This gap is not just one of experience but also of understanding. Al suspects the problems that await him at home, but Fred sees no further than his reunion with Marie. The former are thrust upon Al almost as soon as he’s in the door, while the latter is delayed so that the mutual attraction between Fred and Peggy can be established, and privileged.

As a result of his wartime trauma, Fred is drawn to Peggy’s emotional maturity. Given Warshow’s comments, we might see this as juvenile regression, with Fred reverting from sexual desire (Marie) to desire for pre-sexual love (Peggy). However, it is also a preference for a woman who can encompass his trauma, rather than brush it aside. Witness his faltering at Marie’s apartment after Peggy drives him

there. After their awkwardly formal conversation, Peggy watches, wanting him to go in but also wanting him to return. As he waits to be buzzed in, Fred mimes falling asleep against the buzzer, mimicking his actions of the previous night. Peggy's laughter at this briefly shared moment is crucial to our acceptance of their mutual attraction. A shot through her car window recalls Homer's anxiety over seeing Wilma. It is an eloquent moment, asserting that Fred might have already come home without realising it, that Peggy might be home to him.

Marie is neither wise nor nurturing, and this leads to her getting short shrift from commentators on *Best Years*. Rather uncharitably, Agee calls her 'a bag'<sup>482</sup>, and Reisz labels her 'an unfaithful floozie'.<sup>483</sup> Warshow writes,

[Marie] is the one "bad" woman, and her badness consists essentially in being less instead of more mature than her husband; she is a problem and she should be a mother.<sup>484</sup>

There is a sense of reservation in Warshow's assertion, especially in his use of quotation marks and the word 'essentially'. Chopra-Gant more judiciously observes, 'great care is taken in the film to construct Peggy's character as thoroughly respectable and to strike a contrast between her character and Fred's sexually promiscuous wife.'<sup>485</sup> I will argue that the film presents Marie in quite different terms, drawing upon my previous suggestion, regarding *My Favourite Wife*, that the return-to-marriage film's values often reside in the presentation of 'the other woman'. Marie is contrasted to the other women in the film, but not invidiously. It is to the film's credit that it allows for the possibility of both Peggys and Maries in the post-war world, with some measure of sympathy allowed for Marie's resonant complaint to Fred, 'I gave you the best years of my life!'

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<sup>482</sup> Agee, James, *Agee on Film*, p. 230.

<sup>483</sup> Reisz, Karel, 'The Later Films of William Wyler', p. 27.

<sup>484</sup> Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 131.

<sup>485</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America*, p. 34.



Despite the petulance of her delivery, and her impatience with Fred's trauma, Marie remains sympathetic through her constructive efforts to bolster their marriage. She gives up her lucrative job at the night-club (and an active social life) so that Fred can take on the role of the breadwinner. By denying Marie her independence, and insisting upon his masculine responsibilities, Fred damages their chances of success. Indeed, there is something unpleasantly self-righteous in Fred's scenes with Marie. 'When we were married, babe, that Justice of the Peace said something about "for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse", remember?' he asks, and it is difficult for the audience not to sympathise with Marie's response: 'Well, when do we get going on the better?'

Fred's incompatibility with Marie is established by their delayed reunion, and the disruption of the established tropes of homecoming. All three preceding instances have involved the interruption of female activity. Homer returns to Luella playing, Al interrupts Milly preparing for dinner, Fred finds Hortense hanging laundry. In contrast, Marie is sleeping. Thus Marie's difference is established through her absence from the family home and independence from domestic routine. Irritably rising to answer Fred's knock at the door, her crumpled sheets and disarrayed hair convey a sulky carnality. Throughout the film, Marie is often seen in repose, legs hooked over the arm of a chair or lying back on the sofa. Like the clothes that lie draped over the furniture or the fold-down bed, Marie is associated with the casual and the temporary. She is a woman of the moment, untroubled by the past (save for a mention of Texas, we never find out about her family or her upbringing). Unlike Milly, she doesn't express concern over Fred's health – she is pleased to see him looking so handsome in his uniform. Their immediate embrace (and implied sexual coupling) has none of the hesitation of Al and Milly in the preceding scene.

Intimacy can be both a blessing and a curse. More insistent problems emerge through the mise-en-scene of Marie's two-room apartment. Unsited for co-habitation, always messy, it's clearly a bachelor girl apartment (or as close as the film can get to saying this). Hortense avoided specifically describing Marie's work at the suggestively named Blue Devil (is she a dancer, a hostess, a B-girl?); what seems clear is that the apartment represents professional and, we must assume, sexual convenience. It is unsurprising that Fred never seems at ease in the space. He often stands at the edge of the room, or framed in the doorway. To get to his clothes, he must reach into the wardrobe, pushing past the fold-down bed. This emphasis on restricted movement makes Marie's apartment seem like a place to flop, rather than a place to live. When Fred tries to cook dinner in the kitchen, it seems eccentric.

Growing incompatibility is also expressed by the contrasting performance styles of Dana Andrews and Virginia Mayo. Fred's stiffness and Marie's languor are compared through their relationships to costume. When she sees Fred out of uniform for the first time, Marie disappointedly says, 'You don't look like yourself.' Fred is repeatedly restricted by undesired uniforms – from the air force, from the department store – while Marie's glamour is accentuated through her association with the freedoms of the black market. The apartment suits her physicality – look at the way the camera shifts to accommodate her swinging legs as she flirts on the telephone, laughing with her boss about another woman.<sup>486</sup> Mayo's body, described by David Thomson as possessing 'all the well-fed carnality of wartime blondes'<sup>487</sup>, recalls the wartime pin-up. Fred tells her he pasted her photograph on the plexiglass of his bombsight, a very different association of marriage and combat to that of Al's ('I feel

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<sup>486</sup> In a later moment, Marie wipes a smudge of lipstick from her teeth, a detail which, in showing us the way she constructs her own glamour, makes her even more sympathetic.

<sup>487</sup> Thomson, David, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (London: Little, Brown, 2002), p. 580.

as though I'm about to hit a beach'). The photograph itself is a classic cheesecake shot, promising the uncomplicated sexual comfort of the American glamour girl.

The diegetic jazz that accompanies Marie in many of her scenes associates her with a night-time world outside the purview of this film. The contemporary *It's A Wonderful Life* has a comparable character in Violet Bick (Gloria Grahame), the small town sex-pot. Like Marie, Violet is a lively young woman, rushing toward the liberation afforded by a post-war America. Both draw lustful attention from admiring males, Violet when she walks down the street, Marie when her husband shows her photo to 'the boys'. Each of them leaves town during their films, tired of its constrictions, but Violet returns. Perhaps as a result of *It's A Wonderful Life*'s small-town setting, Violet is inflected more tragically than Marie. Her departure, it is implied, comes from the need to escape disapproving eyes, the strong implication being that she has fallen pregnant. In George Bailey's nightmare vision of Pottersville, Violet has been reduced to a dime-a-dance tramp. It is a cruel fantasy of what awaits the liberated woman in a world that abuses her sexual freedom. By contrast, Marie's association with the big city is shown to be autonomous. She knows people in the black market, is wooed by the proprietors of The Blue Devil, and she imperiously snubs admiring wolves like Cliff (Steve Cochran) at The Embassy Club.

Each performer's inherent physical quality (Mayo's robustness and Grahame's fragility) stresses Marie and Violet's knowledge of their own charisma differently. We might compare Violet's enjoyment of the attention she gets from George (James Stewart), Bert (Ward Bond) and Ernie (Frank Faylen) on the street to Marie's aloofness toward Cliff. Violet is the available girl who men dream about, causing them to hurry back to their wives. Marie is the married woman who picks and chooses as she sees fit. It is an important distinction, because *It's A Wonderful Life*

ends with Violet single while Marie is coupled with Cliff at the end of *Best Years*. Most importantly, we support Marie's decision to leave Fred. Her final line – 'You'll get a good job someplace. There are drugstores *everywhere*' – is an accurate jibe that snaps him out of his lethargy. Unlike, say, *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946, Paramount), *Best Years* does not condemn the errant wife. She is a good-natured good-time girl, not a femme fatale. If anything, Fred is apportioned more blame for the marriage's break-up. Our sympathy for Marie is greatly increased by the vitality of Virginia Mayo's performance, and its contrast to the humourlessness of Dana Andrews.<sup>488</sup> Adding to Thomson's description of 'robustness', we might categorise the attraction of Mayo's performance as her ability to exist between healthiness and sultriness. It is the inability to exist as a financial unit that settles Fred and Marie into clenched animosity. Her nagging makes him into a resentful husband, while his surliness robs her of vitality and enthusiasm.

### **'I'm going to break that marriage up.'**

Arriving home after a dismal night out with the Derrys, Peggy makes an announcement that troubled the Breen Office:

Peggy should not indicate that her purpose is "to break the marriage up." The line, "I can't stand it, seeing Fred tied to a woman he doesn't love," should be eliminated. [...] The break-up of the marriage between Fred and Marie cannot avoid the flavour of being justifiable. We feel that the present ending is a definite indication and justification of the break-up of a marriage. We ask that such indication should be eliminated.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>488</sup> Mayo was best known as a comedienne at this point in her career, first taking the Dorothy Lamour role alongside Bob Hope in *The Princess and the Pirate* (David Butler, 1944, Samuel Goldwyn Company), then becoming more closely associated with Danny Kaye in *Wonder Man* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1945, Samuel Goldwyn Company) and *The Kid from Brooklyn* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1946, Samuel Goldwyn Company). Post *Best Years*, Mayo became less associated with girl-next-door roles. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (Norman Z. MacLeod, 1947, Samuel Goldwyn Company) is particularly instructive – for much of the film, it is unclear whether Mayo's character is "good" or "bad", contributing to Kaye's manic distress. By the time of *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949, Warner Brothers), Mayo is more comfortably cast as moll.

<sup>489</sup> Lyon, Peter, "The Hollywood Picture", p. 355-6.

It is unsurprising that Wyler (successfully) fought for the scene to remain intact. As well as its effect upon the Fred-Marie-Peggy triangle, it also shows us the cracks in the Stephenson marriage and Al's limitations as a father.

The Derry's separation occurs not through Peggy's agency, but Marie's. As I have argued above, the numerous reasons for Fred and Marie's incompatibility do not involve Peggy. Far from justifying home-wrecking, then, this scene insists upon Peggy's fragility. By diminishing her responsibility for the break-up, the film accepts that marriages collapse, but as a result of social pressures rather than the actions of an individual. We may speculate, then, that the censor's objections could be dismissed once Wyler had shot the scene, and certain emphases were made through mise-en-scene and performance. Notwithstanding the Breen Office's over-literal reading of the screenplay, the difficulties with constructing the wholesome Peggy as home-wrecker may be classified as (a) her presentation as a child, and (b) our knowledge of ways the situation can be defused.

On Peggy's entrance into Al and Milly's bedroom, Al sardonically asks if it is 'children's hour', then belches. Frustrated at not being taken seriously, Peggy naively compares Fred and Marie's bad marriage to the good marriage of her parents, who, she says, 'never had any trouble of any kind'. While she desperately wants her parents' approval, it is significant that none of Peggy's questions are really answered by them. Al and Milly replace one idealised imagination of their past with another, in which they continually 'fall in love all over again'. Confronted by the invulnerability of her parents, Peggy seems even more child-like, throwing herself down upon their bed and sobbing uncontrollably.

This talking at cross-purposes is a diversionary tactic, recalling the dangerous territory approached when Al and Milly danced in Butch's. The troubling aspects of

the Stephenson marriage are acknowledged without condemnation. By introducing Friedhofer's *Best Years* theme at this point, a luxurious sense of nostalgia is invoked, implying that repeated discord and reconciliation is somehow romantic and necessary. However, it also asserts Al and Milly's irrelevance to their daughter's future, confining them to a rosy past. It is implied that Fred and Peggy must confront the future together, without reliance on the props (or music) of the past.

Wyler keeps Frederic March on his feet for most of the scene, so that Al's aggressive advice ('How are you going to do it? With a hammer?') seems boorish and intimidating. He hovers at the edge of the conversation, kept at bay by Milly, who eventually ushers him out of the room with a look. The scene ends with a shot of him pacing the landing, smoking nervously. To some extent, Al's fatherly bluster neutralises Peggy's threat to the Derry marriage. He has said she is a child and we agree with him. However, in this private moment on the landing, we see his conflict. Unlike Milly, he cannot console Peggy since he feels he hardly knows her.

Recalling his first night's drinking spree, Al responds to this family crisis by retreating into the world of masculine bravado. He arranges to meet Fred at Butch's place, taking on the role of forbidding patriarch. By localising Al's alienation from his wife and daughter to Butch's, the film gives the lie to Agee's claim that the bar is a 'device'. Returning to the location allows the film to articulate Al's inadequacy as an adjudicator, and to insist that his position is far more complicated than simply writing Fred off as a 'smooth operator'. Indeed, Fred is precisely the kind of ex-serviceman that Al believes business should be assisting. It is Fred's encounter with a genuine 'smooth operator' (Cliff) that moves him toward self-awareness and employment.

## Homer & Wilma

Arguing that *Best Years* is a fantasy of male passivity, Warshow writes, ‘For each of the main characters, there is a scene in which the woman he loves undresses him’.<sup>490</sup> As I have mentioned, this account does not acknowledge male frustration at this passivity. The breakdown of Fred’s marriage to Marie emerges from this frustration, and the failure of his initial romance with Peggy is another casualty. I shall argue, in my next section, that Al and Milly’s future is left ambiguous.

Warshow ends his essay with an analysis of Homer and Wilma’s romance that is worth quoting in full:

And when it is the sailor who is put to bed, the dream becomes almost explicit. He is the man (the real man) who has lost his hands – and with them his power to be sexually aggressive (this fact is lightly emphasized a number of times). Every night, his wife will have to put him to bed, and then it will be her hands that must be used in making love. Beneath the pathos of the scene (certainly the most dramatic scene in the movie), one feels a current of excitement, in which the sailor’s misfortune becomes a kind of wish-fulfillment, as one might actually dream it: he *must* be passive; therefore he can be passive without guilt.<sup>491</sup>

In accepting Homer’s self-description (‘as dependent as a baby that doesn’t know how to get anything except cry for it’), Warshow misses the scene’s implications for the couple. It is important that Wilma is shown to be assuming the duties of Homer’s father. Given this, I read the scene not as Homer ceding sexual autonomy to Wilma, but rather as Wilma demonstrating her maturity, showing Homer that she is no longer ‘just a kid’. Equally, Homer’s instruction of Wilma, his description of their future, shows us how he has matured, dismissing the fantasy of infantilisation.

Unchaperoned, they embrace passionately. Through this act, achieved together, the scene answers the question that Al posed at the beginning of the film –

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<sup>490</sup> Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience*, p. 131.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

now Homer *can* put his arms around Wilma, and her joy is registered in a close-up. It is implied that Homer's physical life has become fuller, leaving behind solitude and violence in favour of a fulfilling love. It is a hopeful scene, quite different to the other moments of undressing to which Warshow refers. Where Milly's kiss was rebuffed by the drunken Al, here Wilma's kiss is reciprocated, promising a healthy future for the couple.

### **Homer & Wilma, Al & Milly, Fred & Peggy**

The film ends with Homer and Wilma's marriage, the young couple joining adult society. With Homer's anxieties over Wilma resolved, the marriage moves their union from the personal out into the social, while framing the reconciliation of Fred and Peggy. At the start of the film, Homer's nerves over returning home occurred as his cab pulled to the curb. This final sequence begins with a row of cars parked at the sidewalk, repeating the motif to emphasise Homer's contented reintegration.

The marriage ceremony takes Homer and Wilma together into adulthood. At the start of the sequence, Butch is schooling some children in the wedding march, acting as their music teacher just as he has for Homer. One child begins singing too quickly and Butch quickly corrects her. While Homer was able to play confidently in the comforting masculine environment of the bar, under the tutelage of Butch, the potential for error presaged in the child's singing extends to Homer's solo performance at the altar.

The room is full of flowers, reinvigorating a previously drab setting. Milly and Peggy are ever so slightly more fashionable than the other ladies at the party, their hats elegant and understated. Wilma's mother greets them as though they were celebrities. Accordingly, Al presents her with a lavishly wrapped gift. There is no



strong sense of class difference, just the feeling that it is the marriage that has brought a disparate set of people together.

Peggy's anxious glances around the room establish her trepidation (excitement?) at meeting Fred. Out on the terrace, Fred is lighting a cigarette for a nervous Homer. Al comes out bearing a glass of punch. It is the first time the three men have been together since that first night in Butch's, and we reflect upon the changes in their relationship. Chopra-Gant argues that the film 'positions Al as a symbolic father to Fred' and that in this final scene

the film prepares the way for Fred's ultimate attainment of middle-class status (something which the film does not actually show but does set up as an inevitable outcome) as a kind of inheritance passed from father to son.<sup>492</sup>

Chopra-Gant compares the drinking of Al and Pat Derry, suggesting that the 'rediscovery of faith in American values expressed in Al's speech' is echoed by the re-awakening of 'the possibilities for individual achievement' when Pat reads Fred's war record.<sup>493</sup> This inheritance is dependent upon whether we accept Chopra-Gant's (in my view, misguided) characterisation of Al's 'benign paternalism' as

a metaphor for the relationship between the nation and its people, with Al's character embodying all of the ideological values of democracy and classlessness that characterized one of the key tropes of the postwar social order.<sup>494</sup>

Chopra-Gant errs in describing the film's ending as unambiguously triumphant. The final conversation between Al and Fred is not one of reconciliation, but of strained tolerance. They are no longer the 'lovely couple' that Milly joked about, with Fred clearly uncomfortable in Al's presence. Al's question about Fred moving home with his parents is particularly pointed. There is the implicit suggestion that Fred has become infantilised just as Homer is becoming a man; that Al approves

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<sup>492</sup> Chopra-Gant, Mike, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America*, p. 36.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

of the move toward domesticity; that, despite this, he is financially comfortable enough to find the action surprising; and that he is wondering what leaving Marie will mean for Peggy. He offers Fred a drink, a reminder of the bitterness at Butch's, but also as an olive branch. Fred's answer is suggestive: 'Maybe later.' As Fred leaves, Milly scolds Al for drinking the punch. Al has reneged on a promise, and by choosing to reintroduce the question of his drinking at this late stage, the film asserts that some things cannot be mended. The scene ends on a note of uncertainty, as Milly tastes his drink and shoots him a sideways glance, giving us no assurance as to how these underlying problems will work out for the Stephensons.

Andre Bazin has written that '[the] gaze always forms the skeleton of Wyler's mise-en-scene'.<sup>495</sup> As Homer and Wilma's marriage takes place, Fred and Peggy realise their irresistible attraction through an exchange of looks. As Homer and Peggy vocalise their social contract 'in the face of this company', Fred and Peggy gaze at one another, privately affirming their own vows. Fred is positioned at the extreme left of frame, staring fixedly away from the camera, directing our glance toward Peggy. Their detachment focuses us away from the ceremony occurring right of frame.

This is not to say that Homer and Wilma's marriage is diminished in importance, just that it acts as counterpoint. Wyler cuts in from the wide shot of the room, so that we see Homer placing the ring on Wilma's finger (another moment of physical confidence that belies Warshow). He stumbles over his words but gets through them as Al and Milly look on benevolently, their attention quite detached from Fred and their own daughter. When Homer and Wilma embrace, the crowd closes in on them, congratulating and welcoming them.

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<sup>495</sup> Bazin, Andre, 'The Evolution of Film Language', p. 82.

Fred walks over to Peggy and kisses her. It is Fred who has had to change, to mature emotionally, so that he may justifiably make this move. Holding her, he says, ‘You know what it’ll be, don’t you, Peggy? It may take us years to get anywhere – we’ll have no money, no decent place to live, we’ll have to work, to get kicked around...’. The ellipsis, their knowledge that this future can only be an unfinished sentence, makes this concluding scene seem like a beginning. Reframing Chopra-Gant’s description, we might usefully see this as the couple defining themselves *against* conventional middle-class values. Rather than end the film with them joining the crowd, Wyler keeps Fred and Peggy separate from it. As they kiss for a second time, the symbol of Peggy’s middle-class elegance, her hat, topples back. Without recourse to the securities of the past, Fred and Peggy must build a future together.

### **The constructed family in *Tomorrow is Forever***

By grouping *My Favourite Wife* and *Best Years* as return-to-marriage narratives, we have seen how the same melodramatic premise may produce two tonally different films. My third example, *Tomorrow is Forever* (Irving Pichel, 1946, International Pictures), hews closer to Tennyson’s *Enoch Arden*.<sup>496</sup> Where this chapter’s other films have worked toward reunion, *Tomorrow is Forever* imagines a darker world, where traumatic absence makes the original couple untenable. In this film, the returning husband has been so affected (mentally and physically) by his time away that his grieving wife does not consciously identify him.<sup>497</sup> This is the return-to-marriage narrative as psychodrama, where recognition is repressed. While *My*

<sup>496</sup> The text on *Tomorrow is Forever*’s MGM/UA VHS release notes this literary inheritance.

<sup>497</sup> There is a parallel here to *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). The amnesiac ‘Smitty’ (Ronald Colman) falls in love with Paula (Greer Garson). They marry but a knock on the head reverts Smitty to a pre-war consciousness that has no recollection of Paula. She takes a job as his secretary, hoping to prompt his unconscious mind. He marries her again, with no memories of their lost years, and it is only through returning to the scene of their first meeting that he recaptures them.

*Favourite Wife* and *Best Years* attempt (with varying degrees of success) to propose a future for their married couples, *Tomorrow is Forever* consigns its original couple to the past, entrusting the future to children. Reconstituting the original family is no longer possible, or even desirable.

The film begins with Elizabeth (Claudette Colbert) learning that her husband John Andrew Macdonald (Orson Welles) has been lost in the trenches of the First World War. A brief flashback shows us MacDonald announcing his enlistment to his shocked wife. Pregnant with Macdonald's child, Elizabeth returns to work but collapses. She is taken in by the kindly Lawrence Hamilton (George Brent), son of her employer. Elizabeth and Lawrence decide to marry, and Elizabeth gives birth to a son, named Drew after his absent father. Cut to a field hospital, where the kindly Dr. Ludwig (John Wengraf) is treating a heavily bandaged patient. It is MacDonald, who vows that Elizabeth will never see him in this condition, and that it is better that she think him dead. The doctor vainly attempts to convince him of his folly.

Flash forward to 1939, as the happy Hamilton family – Lawrence, Elizabeth, Drew (Richard Long) and a younger son Brian (Sonny Howe) – hear that another European war seems inevitable. Drew, now on the verge of manhood, expresses a desire to join the RAF. The male members of the family, Lawrence and Brian (who is about thirteen), fully support Drew, while Elizabeth fears losing another loved one to overseas conflict. Amazingly, Drew knows nothing of his true father, or of the way that he is supposed to have died.

Into this situation comes European Erik Kessler, actually an aged and debilitated MacDonald. From Austria, MacDonald/Kessler brings with him a young refugee named Margaret (eight-year old Natalie Wood). At first, we are unsure of their exact relationship; Margaret calls Kessler 'Vater', which he corrects to 'Father'.

Despite his guardianship and educative responsibility, he is very ill and reliant upon regular medicine, which Margaret administers.<sup>498</sup> Eventually the film will reveal that she is an orphan in Kessler's care, the child of the murdered Dr. Ludwig. The strong implication is that they are *both* orphans, each coming to America with shattered pasts. Thus, while Margaret hardly affects the action of the narrative, she bears a great metaphorical weight. As a child of tragedy, she symbolises not only a stricken Europe but also the enforced absence of choice. Margaret's terrible history will make Elizabeth's isolationism seem quaint, even objectionable.

From this convoluted premise, *Tomorrow is Forever* unfolds its narrative with a kind of dream logic. Kessler goes to work in Hamilton's factory, becoming a friend of the family without revealing his former identity. In an unconscious act of transference, Elizabeth begins to blame Drew's resolve to enlist upon Kessler. This, in turn, engenders her vague suspicions that Kessler somehow *is* MacDonald returned. When Drew runs away to enlist without his mother's permission, it is Kessler who stops him at the railway station and brings him back. At the end of the film, Kessler insists that he is not her first husband, freeing Elizabeth from her past with the homily 'tomorrow is forever'. Kessler dies that night, and, having agreed that Drew should enlist, Elizabeth and Lawrence take in Margaret.

In struggling to adequately summarise the film's convolutions of plot, I am reminded of similar travails over *My Favourite Wife*, with which I started this chapter. Each movie's incoherence around character motivation is the result of a notable narrative ellipsis (in *My Favourite Wife*, what happened on the desert island; in *Tomorrow is Forever*, Elizabeth's reasons for withholding Drew's true parentage). In both cases, this ellipsis is masked with recourse to narrative tropes familiar from

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<sup>498</sup> Throughout the film, Natalie Wood's remarkable performance emphasises Margaret's generosity of spirit and capacity for sympathy.

established movie cycles (for the former, the comedy of remarriage; for the latter, the psychoanalytic melodrama).

While *Tomorrow is Forever* has no psychoanalyst figure or explicit reference to Freudianism, I wish to group it with a sequence of psychoanalytic movies that emerged in the 1940s – films such as *Kings Row* (Sam Wood, 1942, Warner Brothers), *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945, Selznick International Pictures) and *The Locket* (John Brahm, 1946, RKO). The contemporary anxiety over psychoanalysis these films display is neatly summarised in *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947, Warner Brothers), when a hospital orderly notes that ‘one manic, three seniles, six alcoholics, and ten schizos’ have been admitted in one day. His doctor’s reply functions as social comment and acknowledgement of generic prevalence: ‘And going up all the time. This civilisation of ours has a worse disease than heart trouble or tuberculosis and we can’t escape it.’

In an essay on *The Locket*, George Toles suggests that these films respond to the impossibility of articulating veterans’ experience of war. Comparing the damaged protagonists of 1940s *noir* to the ‘socially legible’ characters of 1930s films, he argues that ‘[t]he hidden life is both a new narrative domain and another avenue of escape, however limited, from the superego straitjacket of the Production Code’.<sup>499</sup> Toles portrays the amnesia plot as potentially liberating, reclaiming to some extent a ‘plausible space of innocence’.<sup>500</sup> His discussion of protagonists is especially pertinent to the plot of *Tomorrow is Forever*:

Spectators wanted to get close to them – a shadowy sense of nearness, what I initially called a ‘moral occult’, borrowing a phrase from Peter Brooks – but without shining a clear light. The secret has to do with identity and is animated by a current of anxious expectancy; it is one that demands expression and some degree of clarification, though no

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<sup>499</sup> Toles, George, “The gift of amnesia in John Brahm’s *The Locket*” in *Film International* VII: 42 (2009), p. 35.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

one really wants to be in on the secret completely. It is as though one longed to behold a ghost, but equally longed to have the vision fade before being obliged to meet its gaze. The ghost is there for *you*, but as a stranger, or rather an intimate not yet disclosed.<sup>501</sup>

*Tomorrow is Forever*'s Freudian credentials are most evident in its association of repression with place. The film stages MacDonald's revelation of enlistment in their bedroom, making it a traumatic site. In the 1939 section of the movie, the luxury and safety of the Hamilton mansion is undermined by the abandoned MacDonald home, a nagging reminder of unresolved tragedy, and of an untended Europe. However, the film struggles to articulate adequately the MacDonald house's role as a cathartic site. A comparison with *The Locket* and *Random Harvest* is instructive, in which amnesiac protagonists return obsessively to a traumatic location. While these movies confidently assert the psychic distress of their protagonists, *Tomorrow is Forever* withholds this courtesy from Elizabeth, an inevitable result of her obscure motivations. Uniquely, this is a Freudian dream movie that denies us access to its protagonists' dreams.

### **'I never let her grow up.'**

While Elizabeth's lie about Drew's parentage compromises her motherly role (signaled to us by her children calling her 'Liz'), the film does not portray her unsympathetically. Quite the contrary: Colbert's performance richly conveys Elizabeth's struggle to maintain composure as her worst fears threaten to be realised. One of the film's projects is to dramatise the restrictions imposed upon women in a patriarchy.

This is established through reference to Colbert's changed wartime persona. In *So Proudly We Hail!* (Mark Sandrich, 1943, Paramount), she had presided over a

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

corps of nurses returning from the Philippines; in *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944, Selznick International Pictures) she was the matriarch running a household while her husband fought overseas. In both films, Colbert benignly exerts power over the domestic space, acting as a conduit between America and the conflict overseas. By stripping her of this autonomy, *Tomorrow is Forever* makes Elizabeth's passivity contingent upon prevailing codes of masculinity, so that the progress of the film moves her from an ancillary position to a position of post-war 'usefulness'.<sup>502</sup>

The film begins in the offices of the Hamilton factory, as a group of employees toast the end of war with their employer. The opening shot strategically sidelines Elizabeth from the group and, by implication, their attitudes and assumptions. Lawrence's father (Douglas Wood) speaks proudly of his factory's employees' participation in previous American conflicts. It is a history of sending sons to war – for Lincoln, McKinley and Wilson – of patriarchal duty handed down without question. Lawrence, hovering at his father's elbow, a son who has not been called up, notices Elizabeth at the window. Her separation from the patriarchal group saves her from being patronised by Mr. Hamilton ('in my day, the fair sex graced the home and not the office') but emphasises her complete lack of engagement. Elizabeth is disinterested, uninvolved.

A month later, Elizabeth receives the telegram relaying MacDonald's death. Numbed, she slowly climbs the staircase to their bedroom. Staircases will recur as a motif throughout the film, a symbol of Elizabeth's helplessness. Returning to work some time afterwards, she collapses on another staircase, to be rescued by Lawrence. Years later, she is introduced to Kessler on the grand Hamilton mansion staircase, and she will confide to her husband, 'Larry, when I was coming down the stairs and saw

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<sup>502</sup> The ante-bellum project of the film might be summarised as, 'Elizabeth must reach a position from which she can release her son to fight in a morally justified war'.



him standing there, I had the strangest feeling.’ At the conclusion of the film, the shot is repeated when Elizabeth confronts Kessler. Her relationship to this element of décor characterises her as both ornamental and running on predestined tracks, following the fixed route dictated by her repressed trauma.

### **Going home**

The metaphor of paralysis is used to convey Elizabeth’s retarded emotional state. Her initial trauma, MacDonald’s announcement of his enlistment, is shown to us in flashback after she receives the telegram. As with *Penny Serenade*’s use of the gramophone, the female protagonist’s memories are presented through a mediating device, in this case appearing within a mirror.<sup>503</sup> Like the recurring staircases, the mirror encloses Elizabeth, who watches her past play out in the reflection. The scene then cuts into these past events, with MacDonald making his announcement by stepping out in uniform. Elizabeth has been teasing her husband over buying his own clothes (‘Aren’t you getting to be a big boy!’) but a close-up on her face captures the moment when she moves from laughter to shocked silence. Holding the shot on Elizabeth’s changing expression, and withholding the object of her attention - MacDonald in uniform - asserts the terrible effect of this revelation.

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<sup>503</sup> *Tomorrow is Forever* resembles *Penny Serenade* too in the emphasis placed upon children as a continuance and validation of marriage. Both films describe domestic space as imbued with memory, with particular regard paid to the dramatic potential of staircases. However, while *Penny Serenade* structures itself around female subjectivity and the bittersweet nature of happy memories, *Tomorrow is Forever* invites an objective view of Elizabeth’s obsessive preoccupation with past tragedy.



Fig. 14 Ghosts of the past

The reaction shot creates the expectation of a second moment of revelation later in the film (the man she distrusts is the husband she lost!) but when this does come, it is not given in the terms we expect. Elizabeth's suspicions are arrived at gradually, as though through a fog of amnesia. Material evidence spurs her unconscious mind toward the truth: Kessler's firm handshake, the wedding photographs taken on the steps of the MacDonald home, and, eventually, his voice.

I have suggested above that psychoanalytic movies typically return to a site of original trauma. This structure is exemplified in the concluding scenes of *The Locket*, as we realise that the location of the framing narrative is the big house at the heart of the film's nest of flashbacks. Elizabeth's return to the MacDonald home differs significantly from this pattern. Firstly, it does not come at the end of the film as a moment of objective truth. Secondly, Elizabeth never returns to the exact site of trauma. She hovers outside the house, never entering. Where *The Locket* and

*Random Harvest* repeat dialogue and framings to mimic preceding scenes, bringing the past into the present with a steel-trap circularity, *Tomorrow is Forever* keeps trauma murky and inaccessible.

Wearing a mink coat like a suit of armour, Elizabeth arrives at her old home in a taxicab. It is December 20<sup>th</sup>, the date of her wedding anniversary with MacDonald. The sombre music, the Ionic columns around the doorframe and the general decrepitude make it seem like a mausoleum. Again, the film seems to be operating on dream logic. A useful comparison here may be made with *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which the abandoned house acts as metaphor for George Bailey's marriage. Here, the house's abandonment corresponds with abandoned codes of realism – it lies empty for thematic reasons with little plot justification.

Unable to enter, Elizabeth perches awkwardly on the front steps.<sup>504</sup> Turned away by a closed door, Elizabeth recalls the situation of MacDonald throwing open his dressing room door, revealing his uniform. We hear this as non-diegetic audio, before Kessler's voice interrupts diegetically with: 'Mrs. Hamilton, are you alright?' Without looking up, Elizabeth replies, 'Yes dear,' unconsciously recognising the voice of her first husband. Pichel shoots the moment as a close-up on Elizabeth's face, with Kessler off-screen, so as to recall Macdonald announcing his enlistment. With this Freudian slip, Elizabeth's consciously acknowledges that Kessler might be Macdonald for the first time.

Earlier in the film, Kessler had visited the tumble-down edifice with Margaret, learning that it was unoccupied. This is not quite true – it is the repository of memory, so much so that Kessler's appearance to Elizabeth seems to manifest her unconscious desires, as 'an intimate not yet disclosed'. The ethereal chorale on the

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<sup>504</sup> I take this to be the film disrupting its motif of Elizabeth being trapped by staircases. The exterior and her unconventional, almost childish crouch offer some hope that she will regain a kind of autonomy.

soundtrack completes this spectral re-enactment of their wedding photo. ‘This is the first time I’ve seen this house since I left it 19 years ago,’ admits Elizabeth, as though she were apologising.

Despite being challenged by Elizabeth, Kessler does not admit his identity. It is not enough to confront repressed memories – rather, he schools her to remember Macdonald, then disregard him: ‘Suppose he *were* still alive. Suppose, incredible as it would be, he would choose, for whatever foolish reason, not to come back. You haven’t suffered all these years. You’ve been happy.’ In this moment, Kessler is like a Dickensian ghost, impelling Elizabeth toward her future.

#### **‘A man’s child is his future’**

By rejecting the continued validity of its original couple, *Tomorrow is Forever* suggests that parenthood is a construct rather than a biological fact. This is particularly clear in the scenes of adoptive fathers speaking of their children’s inheritance. It is Lawrence from whom this section’s title is taken, when speaking of Drew as MacDonald’s son, and Kessler restates the thought when he avows that ‘Margaret must carry on her father’s work and his fight, and so carry on his life’. Biological inheritance is therefore qualified by each man’s nurturing relationship with their adopted children; it is clear that Lawrence is responsible for Drew’s earnestness, and Kessler for Margaret’s intelligence. By affirming adoption (Lawrence/Drew, Kessler/Margaret) and complicating biological ties (Elizabeth/Drew), the film asks what qualities confer parenthood. We understand Kessler’s relationship with Drew to be positive because it manages to be both biological *and* adoptive.

A certain flatness in Richard Long’s performance as Drew makes the character seem almost a function of parenthood. Like Margaret, he is a blank canvas upon

which the film projects the anxieties and desires of his three parent figures. This is particularly clear in Drew's early scenes with Kessler. Initially, Kessler is a sounding board for Drew, an opportunity for discussion of Europe with an informed adult. The conflation of world politics and sublimated fatherly feeling is nicely summarised in Kessler's quotation from Thomas Paine: 'If there must be trouble, let it be in my day, that my child may have peace'.<sup>505</sup> Kessler can be a father to Drew because he acts in a fatherly manner.

Recalling my discussion of Gail Patrick in *My Favourite Wife*, we must acknowledge the imbalance of star quality between Orson Welles and George Brent. While Lawrence is portrayed as benign, his authority as a father is also somewhat compromised by his complicity in Elizabeth's lie. I have suggested that the concealment of Drew's parentage runs contrary to Elizabeth's feeling for MacDonald, and to the national pride in deceased servicemen. When Lawrence marries Elizabeth, it is not to cover a shameful pregnancy (a convention familiar from melodrama), or to convince anybody that he is Drew's true father. Wouldn't *someone* have told Drew? It seems unlikely that the citizens of Baltimore would be scandalised by Lawrence marrying the widow MacDonald, or by Elizabeth accepting his offer and thus securing her son's future. However, these must remain mere suspicions. The film offers no sense of the Hamiltons' relation to the community, except as factory owners and factory workers.

Uniquely, Lawrence begins and ends the film as a father taking in an adoptive child. Just as he was happy to lend paternity to Drew in the opening scenes, he accepts Margaret into his family at the conclusion. Nurturing a child is paramount, overriding blood connection. In the film's final shot, Elizabeth carries Margaret away

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<sup>505</sup> Paine, Thomas, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 53.

with the promise that they are going 'home'. She has released Drew to war, nobly surrendering him to patriarchal duty. Elizabeth takes on a child of war, accepting the legacy of Europe into her heart, moving forward for the first time.

### **The price of 'tomorrow'**

When Kessler stops Drew from getting on the train to enlist, the outraged youngster asks him, 'Who do you think you are?' Kessler pauses, as if considering disclosing his secret. 'I am... your father's friend,' he says, Welles' deliberate delivery teasing us momentarily. Unlike the *noir* protagonists discussed by Toles, Kessler knows *exactly* who he is, but his fragmented identity cannot be divulged without destroying Elizabeth and Drew's future.

Considerably weakened, Kessler returns Drew to the Hamilton home. Aunt Jessica puts Kessler by the fire and brings him a brandy. When Elizabeth comes down, she brings with her mementoes of their past life. Elizabeth even accuses him of killing MacDonald, a charge that he does not refute. MacDonald *has* died, in that he is irretrievable.<sup>506</sup> From his reappearance as Kessler, Welles' performance emphasises the downbeat. His solemnity, his experience of Nazi cruelty and his hacking cough characterise him as a figure of death, a man anticipating his own demise. Indeed, while the film does not explicitly state his purpose in bringing Margaret to Baltimore, we may infer that it is to pass her into Elizabeth's care. His past selfishness (proudly choosing to feign his own death) must be atoned for by a series of selfless actions: withholding his identity for the sake of Elizabeth, Drew and Margaret's futures.

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<sup>506</sup> MacDonald's face is obscured by bandages during his scenes in the field hospital, strengthening our sense that Kessler is a different man.

Elizabeth appeals to Kessler's sentiment for their shared past. Whereas before she had been confused, now she seems desperate to retrieve it. For a moment, Kessler seems to give in ('It's wonderful to have been loved so much and to be so remembered') but he uses this to convince her to let go of the past. In doing so, Kessler urges Elizabeth to take on autonomy. She realises, perhaps unconsciously, that this is his purpose. Later she will explain to Drew that 'He [Kessler] brought you home so that I would let you go'.

I have argued that the repeated mirror and staircase motifs symbolise Elizabeth's containment within the past and her subservience to patriarchy. In this final scene between Elizabeth and Kessler, these motifs are re-used to demonstrate the parity of their positions at the end of the film. Elizabeth's entrance into the scene has been down the grand Hamilton staircase, a reminder that her desire to retrieve MacDonald is the root of her oppression. When she has accepted Kessler's disavowal of the past, the unreconciled couple are framed in the mirror above the hearth. The composition recalls Elizabeth's flashback at the beginning of the film, her recollection of the originating trauma. Here, with Kessler standing behind her, she is freed from the enclosing frame, moving out of the mirror's reflection toward Lawrence. Kessler remains, closed off from the 'tomorrow' that he has endorsed.



Fig. 15 Embracing tomorrow

David Thomson has questioned the integrity of Welles' performance in *Tomorrow is Forever*, calling it 'shocking and shameless [...] cynical and sentimental at the same time'.<sup>507</sup> Later in his life, Welles was equally dismissive of the film, admitting to Peter Bogdanovich, 'I was deeply ashamed but in need of money. [...] It was a very successful but ridiculous little charade.'<sup>508</sup> It is true that Welles as an actor seems to operate at a remove from his fellows, the heavy make-up he wears as Kessler exaggerating a Brechtian remove.<sup>509</sup> However, given the film's interest in the construction of family and identity, and the characterisation of Kessler as a figure of

<sup>507</sup> Thomson, David, *Rosebud: The Story of Orson Welles* (London: Abacus, 2005), p. 258.

<sup>508</sup> Rosenbaum, Jonathan (ed.), Welles, Orson and Bogdanovich, Peter, *This is Orson Welles* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 183.

<sup>509</sup> It is important to note that Welles' persona as man of the theatre recurs throughout his film appearances, bringing with it an oft-satirised gravitas. See Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 'Pat Hobby and Orson Welles', *The Pat Hobby Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 62-71.



death, Welles' theatricality cogently expresses these themes.<sup>510</sup> Kessler is a corpse reanimated, as Gothic an edifice as the house in which he once lived. His burden of knowledge distances him from the other characters. He is the only character who completely understands what is at stake.

Having dispensed his advice, Kessler returns to his apartment to die. While Enoch Arden had the comfort of a deathbed confession, Kessler is alone, his final act the destruction of a letter to Elizabeth. With the disposal of this last piece of material evidence, Kessler expires. When Elizabeth and Lawrence take Margaret away from the apartment, the camera pans back to the fireplace to show the smouldering remnants of the letter. It is as though the film is saying not just that family is constructed, but also identity. This need not be as pessimistic as it sounds; as the newly-invigorated Elizabeth has shown, the responsibility for reinvention lies within ourselves.

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<sup>510</sup> Simon Callow seems close to articulating this when he writes, 'Welles is always doing the performance; it's never simply happening, never out of his control, and his great climactic emotional moment, when he is called upon to speak the title line, is simply stagy.' Callow, Simon, *Orson Welles: Hello Americans* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 225.

## Conclusions

Narratives of happy marriage require a different set of critical terms than those applied to stories of courtship. The case studies herein have developed this vocabulary primarily through a delineation of the couple's relation to private and public spaces. Using textual analyses, I have insisted that the married couple's increased societal responsibility is quite different to that of 'young lovers'. In this respect, my work presents an alternative approach to that of Cavell, who adopts Frye's model of New Comedy to discuss married couples in remarriage comedies. In films where remarriage is not at issue, the question is not 'how do we reconfigure society?' but rather, 'what is our ongoing relation to this society?' The story of these happy marriages is their response to the challenge of carving out a place that respects the integrity of their bond. As Young and Glitre have pointed out before me, this is not an easy thing for Hollywood to narrativise. Often, films fail to adequately contextualise the society within which the marriage exists, and this makes it impossible for us to understand the marriage's worth – I have argued that this failing compromises *My Favourite Wife* and *Song of the Thin Man*. In other cases (e.g. the preceding Thin Man sequence), we see that married couples can interrogate and subvert their conjugal roles without overturning the social world. These marriages are fun.

The decision to represent happy marriage is not inherently conservative. Indeed, a couple's movement through, and interaction with, a variety of social environments demonstrates the uniqueness of marriage as a state. Each marriage relates to the world of its film differently: observing imperatives common to the narrative of happy marriage, but providing an individual narrative of social

engagement through which we understand the couple's quotidian existence. In some cases – as in *Penny Serenade* and *Tomorrow is Forever* – the marriage is distanced from the larger community, but this in itself is a statement on engagement, through refutation. It is not contradictory to describe a narrative of happy marriage as 'radical' – indeed, I would happily label *Best Years* as such, in spite of the reservations of Warshaw, Agee, Reisz and others.

Crucially, my thesis distinguishes the narrative of happy marriage from the genre of romantic comedy (in which it is often grouped). Including *Penny Serenade*, *Best Years* and *Tomorrow is Forever* within my corpus demonstrates the inadequacy of this categorisation, given these films' tendency toward the melodramatic. My work shows that the narrative of happy marriage is inextricable from its mise-en-scene, and that previous attempts to distinguish the two<sup>511</sup> create an artificial and unhelpful division. I contend that representing happiness is a process of charting the comfort and assurance with which a central couple relates to the world of their film.

My methodology has been dictated by an attention to the detail of performance, camera movement, soundtrack and mise-en-scene. Working out from these small moments, I have argued that Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s was an intertextual construct (a claim frequently made for the New Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s), in which discrete films drew upon a collective memory of narrative convention and star persona. My focus has been on the ways that these films have addressed their audiences, and the assumptions made about their reception – I welcome future work on audience's response to this address, and the mediation of this dialogue by a thriving fan and gossip culture. By emphasising interconnectedness

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<sup>511</sup> See Young, Kay, *Ordinary Pleasures: couples, conversation, comedy*, p. 6, and Nochimson, Martha P., *Screen Couple Chemistry: the Power of 2*, p. 9.

*across* films, I have shown that Hollywood films of this period not only appropriated the narratives of popular literature but also their formal relationship to an audience.

To my knowledge, this thesis is the first critical study of Hollywood's narratives of happy marriage. While Kay Young's *Ordinary Pleasures* takes on a similar topic, my work restores the 'sights and sounds'<sup>512</sup> that she omits, and finds them indispensable. My *Thin Man* chapters have drawn upon the approach established by Gallafent's book on the Astaire and Rogers cycle, but differ by analysing a diegetically linked series of films. The 'film series' is an under-researched area of Hollywood studies, and one to which I am pleased to contribute. My methodological bias towards close reading has illuminated the richness of what are often seen as 'minor' films, and I trust that this will act as a reminder of the worth of this kind of film study.

Underlying my corpus of films is a shared sense that marriages and families are constructed rather than natural. Even in the best of these, the endlessly happy Nick and Nora, mutually beneficial intercourse is conditional upon the workings of genre. While *Penny Serenade* gestures toward the workings of fate, this is ultimately shown to be a fallacy, subjectively created through the act of remembrance. Happiness is not easily achieved; it must be earned. And it is the act of trying, of being together in the world, that makes the struggle worthwhile.

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<sup>512</sup> Young, Kay, *Ordinary Pleasures: couples, conversation, comedy*, p. 6.

## Appendix: Asta's Love Song

Bow-wow-wow, I love you...

Bow-wow-wow, I do –

Before I go to the bow-wows,

I proposes to rub noses

With a little dog like you.

Bow-wow-wow, I love you...

Bow-wow-wow, I do –

If you leave me in the dog-house,

While you're out prowlin' I'll be howlin'

Bow-wow-wow I'm blue.

Bow-wow-wow, I love you –

Bow-wow I'll be true.

And if you cheat you dog, you, -

Sure's my last-a name is Ast-a,

Bow-wow-wow I'm through.

Bob Wright & Chet Forrest, 24 November 1936. MPAA files for *After the Thin Man*. Special Collections, Margaret Herrick Library.

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## Filmography

Films are listed by release date in country of origin, with corpus films indicated in bold type.

22 March 1930

*Brats*. Dir. James Parrott, Prod. Hal Roach Studios, USA. Main cast: Oliver Hardy (Ollie), Stan Laurel (Stan).

22 April 1930

*Paramount on Parade* (*Murder Will Out* sequence). Dir. Frank Tuttle, Prod.

Paramount, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Philo Vance), Warner Oland (Fu Manchu), Clive Brook (Sherlock Holmes), Eugene Pallette (Sergeant Heath).

31 December 1931

*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Dir. Rouben Mamoulian, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Fredric March (Jekyll/Hyde), Miriam Hopkins (Ivy Pearson), Rose Hobart (Muriel Carew), Holmes Herbert (Dr. Lanyon).

2 April 1932

*Tarzan the Ape Man*. Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan), Maureen O'Sullivan (Jane Parker), C. Aubrey Smith (James Parker), Neil Hamilton (Harry Holt).

13 August 1932

*Jewel Robbery.* Dir. William Dieterle, Prod. Warner Bros., USA. Main cast: William Powell (The Robber), Kay Francis (Baroness Teri), Alan Mowbray (Detective Fritz).

20 October 1932

*The Old Dark House.* Dir. James Whale, Prod. Universal, USA. Main cast: Boris Karloff (Morgan), Melvyn Douglas (Roger Penderel), Charles Laughton (Sir William Porterhouse), Raymond Massey (Philip Waverton).

21 October 1932

*Trouble in Paradise.* Dir. Ernst Lubitsch, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Miriam Hopkins (Lily), Kay Francis (Mariette Colet), Herbert Marshall (Gaston Monescu), Charlie Ruggles (The Major), Edward Everett Horton (François Filiba), C. Aubrey Smith (Adolph J. Giron).

5 November 1932

*Their First Mistake.* Dir. George Marshall, Prod. Hal Roach Studios, USA. Main cast: Stan Laurel (Stan), Oliver Hardy (Ollie), Mae Busch (Mrs. Hardy), Billy Gilbert (Process Server).

6 October 1933

*The Power and the Glory.* Dir. William K. Howard, Prod. Fox Film Corporation, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Tom Garner), Colleen Moore (Sally Garner), Ralph Morgan (Henry).

28 October 1933

*The Kennel Murder Case.* Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Bros., USA. Main cast: William Powell (Philo Vance), Mary Astor (Hilda Lake), Eugene Pallette (Detective Sgt. Heath), Ralph Morgan (Raymond Wrede), Robert McWade (District Attorney Markham), Etienne Girardot (Dr. Doremus), Paul Cavanagh (Sir Thomas MacDonald).

9 February 1934

*Six of a Kind.* Dir. Leo McCarey, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Charlie Ruggles (J. Pinkham Whinney), Mary Boland (Flora Whinney), W. C. Fields (Sheriff John Hoxley), George Burns (George Edward), Gracie Allen (Gracie Devore).

23 February 1934

*It Happened One Night.* Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Clark Gable (Peter Warne), Claudette Colbert (Ellie Andrews), Walter Connolly (Mr. Andrews), Roscoe Karns (Oscar Shapeley).

20 April 1934

*Tarzan and his Mate.* Dir. Cedric Gibbons, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan), Maureen O'Sullivan (Jane Parker), Neil Hamilton (Harry Holt), Paul Cavanagh (Martin Arlington).



4 May 1934

*Manhattan Melodrama.* Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Clark Gable ('Blackie' Gallagher), William Powell (Jim Wade), Myrna Loy (Eleanor Packer), Nat Pendleton (Spud), Mickey Rooney ('Blackie as a boy).

25 May 1934

*The Thin Man.* Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), Maureen O'Sullivan (Dorothy), Nat Pendleton (Inspector Guild), Porter Hall (MacCauley), Henry Wadsworth (Tommy), Minna Gombell (Mimi), Edward Ellis (Clyde Wynant, the Thin Man).

13 July 1934

*The Old Fashioned Way.* Dir. William Beaudine, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: W. C. Fields (The Great McGonigle), Joe Morrison (Wally Livingston), Baby LeRoy (Albert Pepperday).

30 November 1934

*It's a Gift.* Dir. Norman Z. McLeod, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: W. C. Fields (Harold Bissonette), Kathleen Howard (Amelia Bissonette), Jean Rouverol (Mildred Bissonette), Julian Madison (John Durston), Baby LeRoy (Baby Dunk).

Unknown, December 1934

*The Man Who Knew Too Much.* Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Gaumont British, UK. Main cast: Leslie Banks (Bob Lawrence), Edna Best (Jill Lawrence), Peter Lorre (Abbott), Nova Pilbeam (Betty Lawrence).

22 February 1935

*The Whole Town's Talking*. Dir. John Ford, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Edward G. Robinson ('Jonesy'/'Killer' Mannion), Jean Arthur (Wilhemina Clark), Donald Meek (Mr. Hoyt), Etienne Girardot (Seaver).

6 September 1935

*Top Hat*. Dir. Mark Sandrich, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Fred Astaire (Jerry Travers), Ginger Rogers (Dale Tremont), Edward Everett Horton (Horace Hardwick), Erik Rhodes (Alberto Beddini), Eric Blore (Bates), Helen Broderick (Madge Hardwick).

28 February 1936

*Wife vs. Secretary*. Dir. Clarence Brown, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Clark Gable (Van), Jean Harlow (Whitey), Myrna Loy (Linda), James Stewart (Dave).

12 April 1936

*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Gary Cooper (Longfellow Deeds), Jean Arthur (Babe Bennett), George Bancroft (MacWade), Lionel Stander (Cornelius Cobb).

13 May 1936

*The Ex-Mrs Bradford*. Dir. Stephen Roberts, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Dr. Lawrence Bradford), Jean Arthur (Paula Bradford), James Gleason (Inspector Corrigan), Eric Blore (Stokes).

27 August 1936

*Swing Time*. Dir. George Stevens, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Fred Astaire (Lucky Garnett), Ginger Rogers (Penny Carroll), Victor Moore (Pop Cardetti), Helen Broderick (Mabel Anderson), Eric Blore (Gordon).

17 September 1936

*My Man Godfrey*. Dir. Gregory La Cava, Prod. Universal, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Godfrey), Carole Lombard (Irene Bullock), Gail Patrick (Cornelia Bullock), Eugene Pallette (Alexander Bullock).

9 October 1936

*Libeled Lady*. Dir. Jack Conway, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Jean Harlow (Gladys), William Powell (Bill Chandler), Myrna Loy (Connie Allenbury), Spencer Tracy (Haggerty), Walter Connolly (Mr. Allenbury).

12 November 1936

*Theodora Goes Wild*. Dir. Richard Boleslawski, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Irene Dunne (Theodora Lynn), Melvyn Douglas (Michael Grant), Thomas Mitchell (Jed Waterbury).

2 December 1936

*Sabotage*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Gaumont British, UK. Main cast: Sylvia Sydney (Sylvia Verloc), Oscar Homolka (Karl Verloc), Desmond Tester (Stevie).

25 December 1936

*After The Thin Man*. Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), James Stewart (David), Elissa Landi (Selma), Joseph Calleia (Dancer), Jessie Ralph (Aunt Katherine), Sam Levene (Lieutenant Abrams), Dorothy McNulty (Polly).

27 April 1937

*A Star is Born*. Dir. William A. Wellman, Prod. Selznick International Pictures/United Artists, USA. Main cast: Janet Gaynor (Esther Blodgett/Vicki Lester), Fredric March (Norman Maine), Adolphe Menjou (Oliver Niles), Lionel Stander (Matt Libby).

7 May 1937

*Shall We Dance*. Dir. Mark Sandrich, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Fred Astaire (Pete Peters), Ginger Rogers (Linda Keene), Edward Everett Horton (Jeffrey Baird), Eric Blore (Cecil Flintridge), Jerome Cowan (Arthur Miller).

16 July 1937

*Topper*. Dir. Norman Z. McLeod, Prod. Hal Roach, USA. Main cast: Constance Bennett (Marion Kerby), Cary Grant (George Kerby), Roland Young (Cosmo Topper), Billie Burke (Clara Topper), Eugene Pallette (Casey).

15 October 1937

*Double Wedding*. Dir. Richard Thorpe, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Charles Lodge), Myrna Loy (Margit Agnew), Florence Rice (Irene Agnew), John Beal (Waldo Beaver), Jessie Ralph (Mrs. Kensington-Bly).

21 October 1937

*The Awful Truth*. Dir. Leo McCarey, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Irene Dunne (Lucy Warriner), Cary Grant (Jerry Warriner), Ralph Bellamy (Dan Leeson), Alexander D'Arcy (Armand Duvalle), Cecil Cunningham (Aunt Patsy), Molly Lamont (Barbara Vance).

18 February 1938

*Bringing Up Baby*. Dir. Howard Hawks, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Katharine Hepburn (Susan Vance), Cary Grant (David Huxley), Charlie Ruggles (Major Horace Applegate), May Robson (Aunt Elizabeth), Walter Catlett (Slocum), Fritz Feld (Dr. Fritz Lehman).

20 April 1938

*There's Always a Woman*. Dir. Alexander Hall, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Joan Blondell (Sally Reardon), Melvyn Douglas (Bill Reardon), Mary Astor (Lola Fraser), Frances Drake (Ann Calhoun), Jerome Cowan (Nick Shane).

22 April 1938

*Test Pilot*. Dir. Victor Fleming, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Clark Gable (Jim), Myrna Loy (Ann), Spencer Tracy (Gunner), Lionel Barrymore (Drake).

10 May 1938

*Vivacious Lady*. Dir. George Stevens, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Ginger Rogers (Francey), James Stewart (Prof. Peter Morgan), Beulah Bondi (Mrs. Martha Morgan), Charles Coburn (Peter Morgan Sr.).

15 June 1938

*Holiday*. Dir. George Cukor, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Katharine Hepburn (Linda Seton), Cary Grant (Johnny Case), Doris Nolan (Julia Seton), Lew Ayres (Ned Seton), Edward Everett Horton (Prof. Nicholas Potter).

22 July 1938

*Love Finds Andy Hardy*. Dir. George B. Seitz, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Mickey Rooney (Andy Hardy), Lewis Stone (Judge Hardy), Fay Holden (Mrs. Hardy), Judy Garland (Besty Booth), Lana Turner (Cynthia Potter).

21 October 1938

*The Mad Miss Manton*. Dir. Leigh Jason, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Melsa Manton), Henry Fonda (Peter Ames), Sam Levene (Lt. Brent).

5 October 1938

*Mr. Wong, Detective*. Dir. William Nigh, Prod. Monogram, USA. Main cast: Boris Karloff (Mr. Wong), Grant Withers (Capt. Street), Evelyn Brent (Olga /Sophie).

18 November 1938

*The Shining Hour*. Dir. Frank Borzage, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Joan Crawford (Olivia Riley), Margaret Sullavan (Judy Linden), Robert Young (David Linden), Melvyn Douglas (Henry Linden).

19 November 1938

*Nancy Drew Detective*. Dir. William Clemens, Prod. Warner Bros., USA. Main cast: Bonita Granville (Nancy Drew), John Litel (Carson Drew), Frankie Thomas (Ted Nickerson), Frank Orth (Capt. Tweedy).

17 November 1939

*Another Thin Man*. Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), Virginia Grey (Lois MacFay/Linda Mills), C. Aubrey Smith (Col. MacFey), Nat Pendleton (Lt. Guild), Ruth Hussey (Dorothy), Marjorie Main (Miss Dolley), Otto Kruger (Van Slack), William A. Poulson (Nick Jr.).

20 January 1939

*Mr. Moto's Last Warning*. Dir. Norman Foster, Prod. Twentieth Century Fox, USA. Main cast: Peter Lorre (Mr. Moto), Ricardo Cortez (Fabian), Virginia Field (Connie Porter), John Carradine (Danforth), George Sanders (Eric Norvel).

17 February 1939

*Fast and Loose*. Dir. Edwin L. Marin, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Robert Montgomery (Joel Sloane), Rosalind Russell (Garda Sloane), Reginald Owen

(Vincent Charlton), Ralph Morgan (Nick Torrent), Etienne Girardot (Christopher Oates).

19 May 1939

*It's a Wonderful World.* Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Claudette Colbert (Edwina Corday), James Stewart (Guy Johnson), Guy Kibbee ('Cap' Streeter), Nat Pendleton (Sgt. Koretz).

26 May 1939

*The City.* Dir. Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, Prod. American Documentary Films Inc, USA. Main cast: (n/a)

16 June 1939

*Tarzan Finds a Son!* Dir. Richard Thorpe, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan), Maureen O'Sullivan (Jane), John Sheffield (Boy), Henry Stephenson (Sir Thomas Lancing).

19 October 1939

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.* Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Jean Arthur (Clarissa Saunders), James Stewart (Jefferson Smith), Claude Rains (Sen. Joseph Paine), Edward Arnold (Jim Taylor), Thomas Mitchell (Diz Taylor), Eugene Pallette (Chick McGann), Beulah Bondi (Ma Smith), Harry Carey (President of the Senate).



10 November 1939

*The Cat and the Canary*. Dir. Elliott Nugent, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Bob Hope (Wally Campbell), Paulette Goddard (Joyce Norman), Gale Sondergaard (Miss Lu), George Zucco (Mr. Crosby).

11 January 1940

*His Girl Friday*. Dir. Howard Hawks, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Cary Grant (Walter Burns), Rosalind Russell (Hildy Johnson), Ralph Bellamy (Bruce Baldwin), John Qualen (Earl Williams), Helen Mack (Mollie Malloy), Porter Hall (Murphy), Roscoe Karns (McCue).

21 March 1940

*Too Many Husbands*. Dir. Wesley Ruggles, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Jean Arthur (Vicky Lowndes), Fred MacMurray (Bill Cardew), Melvyn Douglas (Henry Lowndes), Harry Davenport (George), Edgar Buchanan (Det. McDermott).

12 April 1940

*Rebecca*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Selznick International Pictures, USA. Main cast: Laurence Olivier (Maxim de Winter), Joan Fontaine (Mrs. De Winter), George Sanders (Jack Favell), Judith Anderson (Mrs. Danvers).

17 May 1940

*My Favorite Wife*. Dir. Garson Kanin, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Irene Dunne (Ellen Arden), Cary Grant (Nick Arden), Randolph Scott (Steve Burkett), Gail Patrick

(Bianca Bates), Ann Shoemaker (Ellen's mother), Scotty Beckett (Tim Arden), Mary Lou Harrington (Chinch Arden), Granville Bates (Judge Bryson).

22 July 1940

*Busman's Honeymoon*. Dir. Arthur B. Woods, Prod. MGM, UK. Main cast: Robert Montgomery (Lord Peter Wimsey), Constance Cummings (Harriet Vane), Leslie Banks (Inspector Kirk), Seymour Hicks (Bunter), Robert Newton (Frank Crutchley), Googie Withers (Polly).

9 August 1940

*I Love You Again*. Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Larry Wilson), Myrna Loy (Kay Wilson), Frank McHugh ('Doc' Ryan), Donald Douglas (Herbert), Nella Walker (Kay's mother).

23 August 1940

*The Great McGinty*. Dir. Preston Sturges, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Brian Donlevy (Dan McGinty), Muriel Angelus (Catherine McGinty), Akim Tamaroff (The Boss), William Demarest (Skeeters).

23 November 1940

*The Lone Wolf Keeps a Date*. Dir. Sidney Salkow, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Warren William (Michael Lanyard), Frances Robinson (Patricia Lawrence), Bruce Bennett (Scotty), Eric Blore (Jamison), Thurston Hall (Inspector Crane).

29 November 1940

*The Bank Dick*. Dir. Edward F. Cline, Prod. Universal, USA. Main cast: W. C. Fields (Egbert Souse), Cora Witherspoon (Agatha Souse), Una Merkel (Myrtle Souse).

26 December 1940

*The Philadelphia Story*. Dir. George Cukor, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Cary Grant (C. K. Dexter Haven), Katharine Hepburn (Tracy Lord), James Stewart (Macauley Connor), Ruth Hussey (Elizabeth Imbrie).

31 January 1941

*Mr and Mrs Smith*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Carole Lombard (Ann), Robert Montgomery (David), Gene Raymond (Jeff), Jack Carson (Chuck).

21 March 1941

*The Lady Eve*. Dir. Preston Sturges, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Jean Harrington), Henry Fonda (Charles Pike), Charles Coburn ('Colonel' Harrington), Eugene Pallette (Mr. Pike), William Demarest (Muggsy), Eric Blore (Sir Alfred McGlannan Keith), Melville Cooper (Gerald).

24 April 1941

*Penny Serenade*. Dir. George Stevens, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Irene Dunne (Julie Adams), Cary Grant (Roger Adams), Beulah Bondi (Miss Oliver), Edgar Buchanan (Applejack Carney), Eva Lee Kuney (Trina, aged six).

23 May 1941

*Love Crazy*. Dir. Jack Conway, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Steve Ireland), Myrna Loy (Susan Ireland), Gail Patrick (Isobel Kimble Grayson), Jack Carson (Ward Willoughby).

24 October 1941

*The Gay Falcon*. Dir. Irving Reis, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: George Sanders (Gay Lawrence), Wendy Barrie (Helen Reed), Allen Jenkins ('Goldie' Locke), Gladys Cooper (Maxine Wood), Edward Brophy (Det. Bates).

21 November 1941

*Shadow of the Thin Man*. Dir. W. S. Van Dyke, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), Barry Nelson (Paul Clarke), Donna Reed (Molly), Sam Levene (Lt. Abrams), Henry O'Neill (Major Sculley), Stella Adler (Claire Porter), Louise Beavers (Stella), Dickie Hall (Nick Jr.).

19 January 1942

*Woman of the Year*. Dir. George Stevens, Prod. 1942, MGM, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Sam Craig), Katharine Hepburn (Tess Harding), Fay Bainter (Ellen Whitcomb), Reginald Owen (Clayton), William Bendix ('Pinkie' Peters).

Unknown, May 1942

*Tarzan's New York Adventure*. Dir. Richard Thorpe, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan), Maureen O'Sullivan (Jane), Johnny Sheffield (Boy), Virginia Grey (Connie Beach), Charles Bickford (Buck Rand).

29 May 1942

*The Falcon Takes Over*. Dir. Irving Reis, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: George Sanders (Gay Lawrence), Lynn Bari (Ann Riordan), James Gleason (Insp. O'Hara), Allen Jenkins ('Goldie' Locke), Ward Bond (Moose Malloy).

6 November 1942

*The Falcon's Brother*. Dir. Stanley Logan, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: George Sanders (Gay Lawrence), Tom Conway (Tom Lawrence), Jane Randolph (Marcia Brooks), Don Barclay (Lefty), Edward Gargan (Det. Bates).

7 November 1942

*The Palm Beach Story*. Dir. Preston Sturges, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Claudette Colbert (Gerry Jeffers), Joel McCrea (Tom Jeffers), Mary Astor (The Princess Centimillia), Rudy Vallee (J. D. Hackensecker III).

27 November 1942

*Once Upon a Honeymoon*. Dir. Leo McCarey, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Cary Grant (Pat O'Toole), Ginger Rogers (Kathie O'Hara), Walter Slezack (Baron Von Luber), Albert Dekker (Gaston Le Blanc).

28 November 1942

*George Washington Slept Here.* Dir. William Keighley, Prod. Warner Bros., USA.

Main cast: Jack Benny (Bill Fuller), Ann Sheridan (Connie Fuller), Charles Coburn (Uncle Stanley), Hattie McDaniel (Hester).

10 December 1942

*A Night to Remember.* Dir. Richard Wallace, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast:

Loretta Young (Nancy Troy), Brian Aherne (Jeff Troy), Sidney Toler (Insp. Hankins), Gale Sondergaard (Mrs. Devoe).

17 December 1942

*Random Harvest.* Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Prod. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, USA. Main cast: Ronald Colman ('Smitty'/Charles Rainier), Greer Garson (Paula), Philip Dorn (Dr. Benet).

30 April 1943

*Sherlock Holmes in Washington.* Dir. Roy William Neill, Prod. Universal, USA.

Main cast: Basil Rathbone (Sherlock Holmes), Nigel Bruce (Dr. Watson), Henry Daniell (William Easter), George Zucco (Heinrich Hinckel).

5 August 1943

*Above Suspicion.* Dir. Richard Thorpe, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Joan Crawford (Frances Myles), Fred MacMurray (Richard Myles), Conrad Veidt (Hassert Seidel), Basil Rathbone (Count Sigurd von Aschenhausen), Cecil Cunningham (Countess von Aschenhausen).

14 February 1944

*Charlie Chan in the Secret Service.* Dir. Phil Rosen, Prod. Monogram, USA. Main cast: Sidney Toler (Charlie Chan), Mantan Moreland (Birmingham Brown), Benson Fong (Tommy Chan).

13 April 1944

*The Memphis Belle: a Story of a Flying Fortress.* Dir. William Wyler, Prod. First Motion Picture Unit, United States Army Air Force, USA. Main cast: (n/a)

20 July 1944

*Since You Went Away.* Dir. John Cromwell, Prod. Selznick International Pictures, USA. Main cast: Claudette Colbert (Anne Hilton), Jennifer Jones (Jane Hilton), Joseph Cotton (Tony Willett), Shirley Temple (Bridget Hilton), Monty Wooley (Col. Smollett), Robert Walker (Bill Smollett).

11 October 1944

*Laura.* Dir. Otto Preminger, Prod. Twentieth-Century Fox, USA. Main cast: Gene Tierney (Laura Hunt), Dana Andrews (Mark McPherson), Clifton Webb (Waldo Lydecker), Vincent Price (Shelby Carpenter), Judith Anderson (Ann Treadwell).

Unknown, 1945

*Diary of a Sergeant.* Dir. Joseph M. Newman, Prod. Signal Corps Photographic Centre U.S. Army, USA. Main cast: Harold Russell (himself), Alfred Drake (voice of Harold Russell).

25 January 1945

***The Thin Man Goes Home.*** Dir. Richard Thorpe, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), Harry Davenport (Dr. Bertram Charles), Lucile Watson (Mrs. Charles), Lloyd Corrigan (Dr. Bruce Clayworth), Crazy Mary (Ann Revere), Edward Brophy (Brogan), Gloria De Haven (Laura Belle Ronson), Donald Meek (Willie Crump).

31 October 1945

***And Then There Were None.*** Dir. René Clair, Prod. Popular Pictures Inc, USA. Main cast: Barry Fitzgerald (Judge Quincannon), Walter Huston (Dr. Armstrong), Louis Hayward (Philip Lombard), Roland Young (Det. Blore), C. Aubrey Smith (Gen. Mandrake), Judith Anderson (Emily Brent).

20 February 1946

***Tomorrow is Forever.*** Dir. Irving Pichel, Prod. International Pictures, USA. Main cast: Claudette Colbert (Elizabeth Hamilton), Orson Welles (John MacDonald/Erik Kessler), George Brent (Lawrence Hamilton), Lucile Watson (Aunt Jessica), Richard Long (Drew Hamilton), Natalie Wood (Margaret Ludwig).

19 April 1946

***The Blue Dahlia.*** Dir. George Marshall, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Alan Ladd (Johnny Morrison), Veronica Lake (Joyce Harwood), William Bendix (Buzz Wanchek), Doris Dowling (Helen Morrison).



1 May 1946

*Cluny Brown*. Dir. Ernst Lubitsch, Prod. Twentieth Century Fox, USA. Main cast: Charles Boyer (Adam Belinski), Jennifer Jones (Cluny Brown), Peter Lawford (Andrew Carmel), Reginald Owen (Sir Henry Carmel), C. Aubrey Smith (Col. Duff Graham).

23 July 1946

*Till the End of Time*. Dir. Edward Dmytryk, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Dorothy McGuire (Pat Ruscomb), Guy Madison (Cliff Harper), Robert Mitchum (William Tabeshaw).

21 November 1946

*The Best Years of Our Lives*. Dir. William Wyler, Prod. Samuel Goldwyn, USA, 1946. Main cast: Myrna Loy (Milly Stephenson), Frederic March (Al Stephenson), Dana Andrews (Fred Derry), Teresa Wright (Peggy Stephenson), Virginia Mayo (Marie Derry), Cathy O'Donnell (Wilma Cameron), Harold Russell (Homer Parrish), Hoagy Carmichael (Butch).

20 December 1946

*The Locket*. Dir. John Brahm, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Laraine Day (Nancy), Brian Aherne (Dr. Blair), Robert Mitchum (Norman Clyde).

7 January 1947

*It's a Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Liberty Films, USA. Main cast: James Stewart (George Bailey), Donna Reed (Mildred Bailey), Lionel Barrymore (Henry F.

Potter), Thomas Mitchell (Uncle Billy), Henry Travers (Clarence), Beulah Bondi (Mrs. Bailey), Gloria Grahame (Violet Bick).

4 April 1947

*My Favourite Brunette*. Dir. Elliott Nugent, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: Bob Hope (Ronnie Jackson), Dorothy Lamour (Carlotta Montay), Peter Lorre (Kismet), Lon Chaney Jr. (Willie), Alan Ladd (Sam McCloud).

26 July 1947

*Possessed*. Dir. Curtis Bernhardt, Prod. Warner Bros., USA. Main cast: Joan Crawford (Louise Howell), Van Heflin (David Sutton), Raymond Massey (Dean Graham), Geraldine Brooks (Carol Graham), Stanley Ridges (Dr. Willard).

28 August 1947

*Song of the Thin Man*. Dir. Edward Buzzell, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: William Powell (Nick Charles), Myrna Loy (Nora Charles), Keenan Wynn ('Klinker' Krause), Dean Stockwell (Nick Jr.), Patricia Morison (Phyllis Talbin), Leon Ames (Mitch Talbin), Gloria Grahame (Fran Paige), Don Taylor (Buddy Hollis).

1 September 1947

*The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*. Dir. Irving Reis, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Cary Grant (Dick), Myrna Loy (Margaret), Shirley Temple (Susan), Rudy Vallee (Tommy), Ray Collins (Beemish), Harry Davenport (Thaddeus).

4 March 1948

*The Naked City*. Dir. Jules Dassin, Prod. Universal, USA. Main cast: Barry Fitzgerald (Det. Lt. Daniel Muldoon), Howard Duff (Frank Niles), Dorothy Hart (Ruth Morrison), Don Taylor (Det. Jimmy Halloran), Ted de Corsia (Willy Garzah).

16 April 1948

*Ruthless*. Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer, Prod. Producing Artists, USA. Main cast: Zachary Scott (Horace Vendig), Louis Hayward (Vic Lambdin), Diana Lynn (Martha Burnside), Sydney Greenstreet (Buck Mansfield), Lucile Bremner (Christa Mansfield), Martha Vickers (Susan Duane).

30 April 1948

*State of the Union*. Dir. Frank Capra, Prod. Liberty Films, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Grant Matthews), Katharine Hepburn (Mary Matthews), Van Johnson ('Spike' McManus), Angela Lansbury (Kay Thorndyke), Adolphe Menjou (Jim Conover).

4 June 1948

***Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House***. Dir: H. C. Potter, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Cary Grant (Jim Blandings), Myrna Loy (Muriel Blandings), Melvyn Douglas (Bill Cole), Reginald Denny (Henry Simms), Sharyn Moffett (Joan Blandings), Connie Marshall (Betsy Blandings), Louise Beavers (Gussie).

6 August 1949

*The Window*. Dir. Ted Tetzlaff, Prod. RKO, USA. Main cast: Barbara Hale (Mary Woodry), Arthur Kennedy (Ed Woodry), Paul Stewart (Joe Kellerson), Rith Roman (Jean Kellerson), Bobby Driscoll (Tommy Woodry).

18 November 1949

*Adam's Rib*. Dir. George Cukor, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Adam Bonner), Katharine Hepburn (Amanda Bonner), Judy Holliday (Doris Attinger), Tom Ewell (Warren Attinger), David Wayne (Kip Lurie), Jean Hagen (Beryl Caighn).

16 June 1950

*Father of the Bride*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Stanley Banks), Joan Bennett (Ellie Banks), Elizabeth Taylor (Kay Banks), Don Taylor (Buckley Dunstan).

27 April 1951

*Father's Little Dividend*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Stanley Banks), Joan Bennett (Ellie Banks), Elizabeth Taylor (Kay Banks), Don Taylor (Buckley Dunstan).

13 June 1952

*Pat and Mike*. Dir. George Cukor, Prod. MGM, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Mike Conovan), Katharine Hepburn (Pat Pemberton), Aldo Ray (Davie Hucko), William Ching (Collier Weld).

25 June 1953

*All I Desire*. Dir. Douglas Sirk, Prod. Universal, USA. Main cast: Barbara Stanwyck (Naomi Murdoch), Richard Carlson (Henry Murdoch), Lyle Bettger (Dutch Heineman), Maureen O'Sullivan (Sara Harper).

1 August 1954

*Rear Window*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: James Stewart (L. B. Jeffries), Grace Kelly (Lisa Fremont), Wendell Corey (Det. Doyle), Thelma Ritter (Stella), Raymond Burr (Lars Thorwald).

1 June 1956

*The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: James Stewart (Benjamin McKenna), Doris Day (Jo McKenna), Bernard Miles (Edward Drayton), Christopher Olson (Hank McKenna).

1 May 1957

*Desk Set*. Dir. Walter Lang, Prod. Twentieth Century Fox, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Richard Sumner), Katharine Hepburn (Bunny Watson), Gig Young (Mike Cutler), Joan Blondell (Peg Costello).

9 May 1958

*Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, Prod. Paramount, USA. Main cast: James Stewart ('Scottie' Ferguson), Kim Novak (Madeleine Elster/Judy Barton), Barbara Bel Geddes (Midge), Tom Helmore (Gavin Elster).

11 December 1967

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.* Dir. Stanley Kramer, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Spencer Tracy (Matt Drayton), Sidney Poitier (John Prentice), Katharine Hepburn (Christina Drayton), Katharine Houghton (Joey Drayton).

23 June 1976

*Murder by Death.* Dir. Robert Moore, Prod. Columbia, USA. Main cast: Truman Capote (Lionel Twain), Peter Falk (Sam Diamond), David Niven (Dick Charleston), Maggie Smith (Dora Charleston), Peter Sellers (Sidney Wang).

18 August 1993

*Manhattan Murder Mystery.* Dir. Woody Allen, Prod. Tristar, USA. Main cast: Woody Allen (Larry Lipton), Diane Keaton (Carol Lipton), Jerry Adler (Paul House), Alan Alda (Ted), Anjelica Huston (Marcia).

8 October 2007

*Gone Baby Gone.* Dir. Ben Affleck, Prod. Miramax, USA. Main cast: Casey Affleck (Patrick Kenzie), Michelle Monaghan (Angie Gennaro), Morgan Freeman (Jack Doyle), Ed Harris (Remy Bressant), Amy Ryan (Helene McCready).